

People! is about human life forced to survive at the margins. Anil Awachat's Marathi classic profoundly disturbed its readers when it first appeared after a period of sheer and prolonged drought in Maharashtra, a state in western India.

Never had the conditions in which common folk have to manage found such compelling literary expression. And condemnation.

People! dwells patiently on the stories of immigrants squeezed beyond tolerance by scarcity: construction workers; adivasis; coolies carrying cement or lime in railway yards; workers processing chillies; women manufacturing beedis. This is life in the raw, in the sewer, in the gutter, shrouded in clouds of pollution, filth and despair. This is how the other half in India still lives.

But *People!* is also a book about human dignity. In their bare, unembellished narration, these shuddering pictures of human adversity prudently evoke respect and awe. And, we hope, anger, catharsis and radical change.



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Anil Awachat

Translated by Vishram Gupte



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Other India Press
Mapusa 403507, Goa, India

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By Anil Awachat

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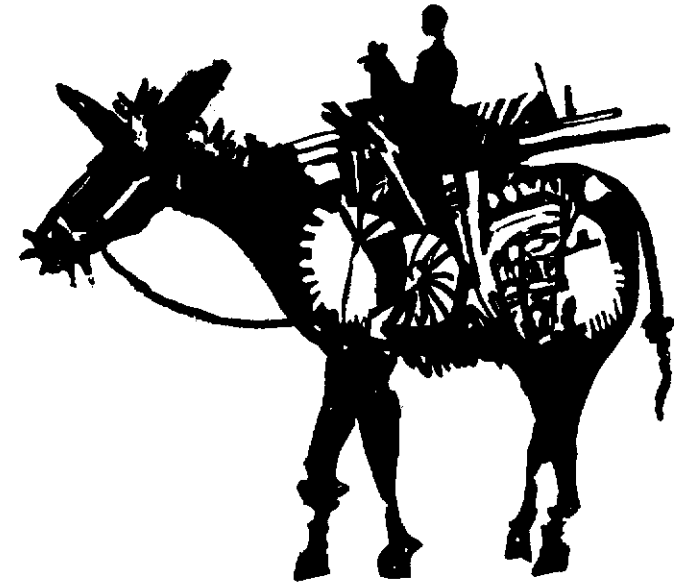
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*Dedicated – with a sense of guilt –
to the marginalized people of this country,
branded everywhere as nomads, migrants and vagrants*



Author's Note

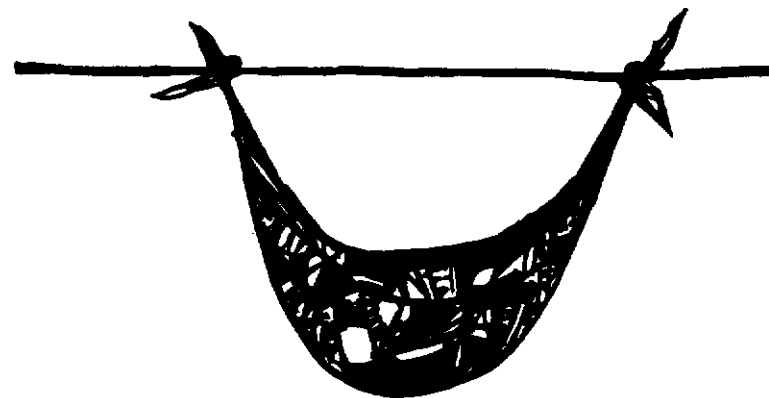
Many friends helped me collect information for this book: Maruti Salunke of Hadapsar for the article 'People'; Baba Adhav for the article on coolies; Laxmanrao Sudrik, Bapurao Udage, Dr. Mira Bapat, Shridhar Kale, Namdev Chavat, Kalyanrao Jadhav for the article on slums; Daulatrao Bhosle, Yallappa Vaidu Guruji, Laxmanrao Vaidu, Vitthal Tupe, Shiddu Shinde, Vitthalrao Bhosle, Aanandrao Jadhav, Murchand Bhat, Haribhau Jejurikar, Aasaram Jadhav, Uttam Gosavi and Kisan Pawar for the article on nomadic tribes.

Prof. Subhash Joshi, Ramesh Shipurkar, Muhammad Gous, I. N. Veg, Gopinath Dharia, Vishnu Nimbalkar and many others have walked with me and freely shared information for the article on Nipani.

Organizations like the Hamal Panchayat, Zopadi-Sangh and Bhatkya Vimukta Jati Sangh have allowed their volunteers to roam with me. The *beedi* workers of Nipani too have walked with me in their town. Subhash Awachat, the artist, has accompanied me during my wanderings and drawn sketches for the book. Sitaram Raikar and Ram Patwardhan of Mouj Prakashan have given me invaluable help in writing. Shri. Pu. Bhagwat, M.P. Rege and Baba Adhav have encouraged me in producing this genre of writing.

Pune

Anil Awachat



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A note from the translator

When 'Manasa!' was first published in 1980, it created an upheaval in the Marathi literary world. Readers and critics were baffled by the contents of the book. The plight of the marginalized people had never been articulated with such penetrating accuracy before. The book, with its deeply compassionate portrayal of oppressed classes of Maharashtrian society, disturbed thousands of readers. It also challenged their quiet sensibility. It continues to do so even today with its ninth reprinting.

Translating this Marathi classic into English gave me an immense sense of satisfaction and purpose. The translation, however, would not have been possible without the consent of Anil Awachat and the threesome who have helped me in the process of translation: Dr. Sheela Gupte, my wife, who read the first raw drafts and corrected them with zeal and commitment; my friend, Vidyadhar Gadgil, who improved the copy painstakingly and finally, my friend, philosopher and guide, Claude Alvares who, with his editorial skills, gave the book its present shape.

I acknowledge their help in making this translation possible with a deep feeling of gratitude.

Goa

Vishram Gupte

A note from Other India Press

So the question will be asked by the curious sampler of this book: Why did Other India Press reprint a book that describes India as it existed twenty to thirty years ago, even if it were a classic of its kind?

Vishram Gupte, the translator, told me of his encounter with a blacksmith in April 2005 in the outskirts of Nagpur city, one of the most modern towns of our age. He was looking for a maker of tops to introduce to his son who is ten years of age. He managed to find a blacksmith just as he was closing shop and asked him if he would produce four tops for him. The blacksmith obligingly reopened his small shop even though it was already late and proceeded to spend the next two hours manufacturing the order, carving the top from wood, fixing the *aaru* – the double pointed metal slip that enables the top to spin. While the fabrication was on, Gupte as usual wanted to know everything about the man, his trade, his family. When the tops were ready, the blacksmith invited Gupte to his home which proved to be a small delapidated room. He offered him 'tea' which comprised water and a teaspoon of sugar. When it came to the price for the four tops, the blacksmith quoted eight rupees. Gupte was stunned. He insisted he would pay him thirty and no less. The blacksmith refused. He said he had been making these tops for many years and never charged anything beyond what he had quoted. If he took anything more, that would be *paap*, a 'sin'. Vishram Gupte is yet to recover from this foray into the 'past' described so well by Awachat in his splendid narrative.

I had occasion myself to visit an industrial estate located in Kochi (Kerala) in October 2004. One of the industries I was taken to included a bone meal manufacturing unit. The stench from the unit nearly killed me. Yet, working within it, were more than a dozen workers who appeared to be completely immune to the appalling conditions of work.

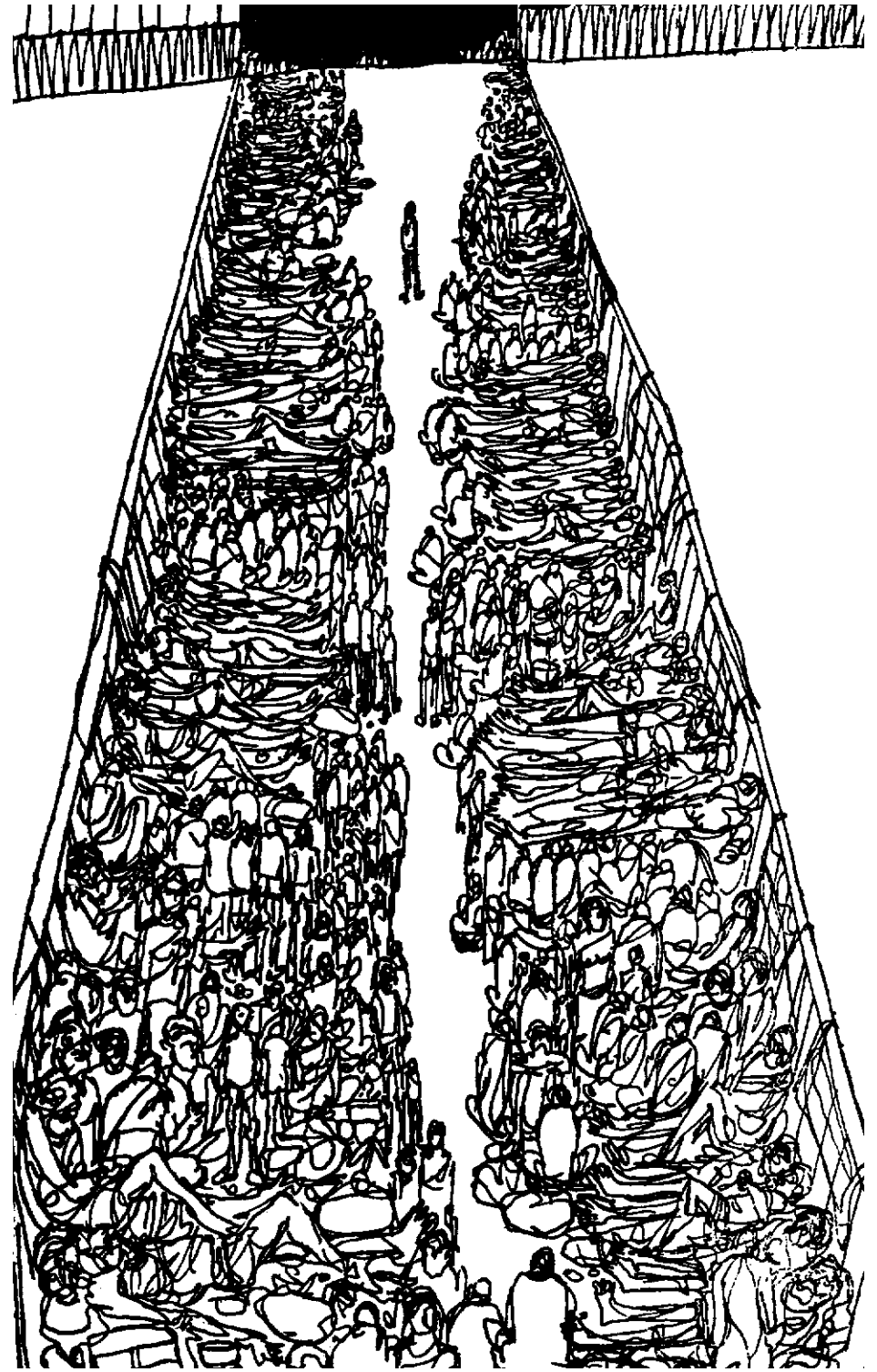
When we went in, noses tightly clamped, we found the workers eating their food next to rotting offal and stinking bones with maggots oozing out of the stuff. My favourite idea of a nightmare in future is to be found forced to eat my tiffin without remission in such circumstances.

What I found even more troubling was the attitude of the authorities who got by pretending these things did not exist at all. After more than fifty years of political independence, one still encounters in the media official declarations vowing to stop the scourge of human toilet scavengers.

Awachat's description of life in the raw in the state of Maharashtra is not thirty years old by any means. It is India today, in many places, in many states. If one's eyes are not perennially blinded, awed or distracted by the ghoulish unreality of *Page 3* characters who dominate the orbits of our leading stars of modernity and progress, one will easily encounter Awachat's characters of yesterday – as they walk out of the pages of his remarkable book – just as one rounds that corner or looks fleetingly under that bridge. This is the other India that Other India Press continues to celebrate for its sheer grit, its humanity, and its compassion. Without it, without its grim determination to survive, modern India is just another brand of toothpaste, as phony as they all come, calcium carbanate mixed with white sugar, first thing to puke out in the morning.

So a warm welcome then to Anil Awachat's people!

Claude Alvares
Editor, Other India Press



People

I was walking down Platform No.1 of Pune railway station. The bell dangling from the roof of the platform glittered as if made of gold. The brass strips holding the dark green cloth firmly to the staircase leading to the First Class waiting room shone brightly. Photographs of a ceremony felicitating Pune on being declared 'The Cleanest Railway Station of India' stared out at the passersby from a nearby showcase. I walked through the passageway and arrived straight at the waiting room meant for Third Class passengers.

A veritable sea of people was gathered there and I could find barely an inch of space into which to squeeze myself. The horde appeared overwhelmingly rural, with the men wearing colourful turbans and the women draped in coarse but brightly coloured *sarees*. It was an unusual crowd, consisting of many families, with all their possessions bundled together in sacks.

As I stepped out of the station into the open, I could see a similar but somewhat larger crowd squatting on the field across the railway station. It, however, appeared rather more settled, with many temporary *chulhas* spewing out thick grey smoke that spiralled slowly upwards. Garbage of all kinds dotted the landscape. Half-naked children in the crowd circled aimlessly around their respective families. There was a wall at the far end of the field. Lumps of human excrement lay scattered all around. Fruit vendors and small-time shopkeepers, selling salted peanuts and *bhaji-pav*, stood in a row across the road, exhaustion writ large on their faces. There was an auto-rickshaw stand nearby, and regular commuters

could be seen irritably making their way through the dense throng, cursing the people squatting there under their breath. The people in the field appeared to have arrived only recently. From their clothes it was obvious they were again rural folk, unmistakably Maharashtrian in origin. Were they on a pilgrimage? The Alandi or Pandharpur pilgrimages were certainly not imminent. Besides, the crowd looked distinctly impoverished and incapable of undertaking a strenuous pilgrimage.

I paused for a moment and then approached a group of young men standing nearby.

'From which village are you?' I asked.

They all remained silent.

'Do you understand what I'm saying?' I asked. One of them nodded, the others slipped away and disappeared into the crowd.

'When did you come here?' I asked the youth who had responded.

'Two days ago,' he mumbled.

'Where from?'

'Osmanabad.'

As the young man began to speak to me, an old man sitting nearby rose to his feet and with folded hands implored me, 'Sir, we will not live here permanently. My eldest son has gone to look for work. We shall leave as soon as he turns up tonight. We do not enjoy living out in the open.'

'I am not a government official out to dislodge you from this place,' I said. 'I was just asking casually.'

The old man appeared somewhat reassured. Overcoming his hesitation, he said, 'Just what do you want to hear from us? We are completely devastated. Our villages are in the grip of a severe drought. We have come to this city just to survive!'

People travel long distances to attend weddings, get higher education, to look for new jobs or just for a change of scene. But these folk had been forced to leave their homes and villages merely to stay alive. Their sole motive was survival.

'Tell me, how did you reach here?' I asked the old man.

'We hail from Osmanabad. Some of us come from Solapur. A severe drought has stricken the region. No rain, not a single drop of water. Wherever it rained a little, the crop was devoured by hordes of rats. In the past, we had always remained firmly rooted in our land, but this time the situation is different. It is unbearable. Mind you, we too are honest, respectable folk, but here in this city, we are reduced to the status of beggars, destitutes.'

As the old man began to narrate his tale of woe, the others who had been milling around idly joined in. One of the women who had been watching us from a distance now came forward and began to complain in a loud voice: 'This rain too has been harassing us. The Ganesh festival is over and yet this drizzle continues. Curse this rain, the pimp! I say, this rain should have visited our parched village. Instead, it has come to hound us here where there is no roof over our heads. The rain forces us to the shelter of the nearby railway platform, but the guards and police there come with *lathis* and drive us out. They hit us on our backs. We are not allowed to use the shelter of the station even for a few minutes.'

These folk had been driven from home and hearth because of a severe drought; but no sooner had they found themselves on this open field, the rain had started up. Wherever they sought shelter, it was the same story. 'Displacement' seemed to be the theme of their life.

In the meanwhile, another train had arrived at the station. A large crowd poured out of the main gate, among them a group of college-going youth out on a picnic. The youngsters carried transistor radios on their shoulders. Some had sets of bongos fastened to their waists. Yet others carried large boxes containing guitars. The colourful clothing, the leather jackets, the fur caps, the large-frame goggles and the bell-bottom trousers worn by the girls all indicated a festive air. Some of the members of this group were seen making enquiries about a luxury coach that could take them round Pune city. A few even expressed delight over the rain.

Soon after this merry gathering dispersed, the ticket-inspectors at the station could be heard loudly berating someone. Fi-

nally, the railway staff began pushing a number of people out of the station premises. With gunny bags on their heads – and frightened expressions on their faces – the refugees stepped out of the main gate. After casting an uncertain glance at the crowd squatting in the open field, they started to walk in a silent procession towards Shivajinagar.

'Look at these people. They are rushing here in large numbers with each arriving train. They have gone crazy. They think they will find some sustenance in this city.' The old man could not conceal his agitation over the arrival of a fresh batch of destitutes.

Commented another: 'This ticket inspector is a little better; the other one is really troublesome. Earlier these inspectors used to arrest us for travelling without tickets and put us in jail. That suited us fine. Isn't it better to be inside a jail rather than be found squatting outside with no roof over our heads? But now they do not bother to arrest us. They just beat us up and let us go.'

By this time the people around me had overcome their diffidence and were talking freely. One of them said angrily, 'These ticket inspectors harass us all the time. "Get down if you don't have a ticket," they yell. When you get down, they ask you, "What's in that bag ... you pimp, open your bag!" "Nothing *sahib*, just a kilo of peanuts in case the children feel hungry." The checker snatches the bag away. "Don't, please don't deprive my children of their food!" I plead. "You rascals, you want to enjoy a free ride in the train. Does your father own the train?" he asks.'

'Have you all come here by train, or did you come by bus or some other mode of transport?' I wanted to know.

A man laughed and said, 'How can we travel by bus? The moment you say that you don't have any money, the conductor blows his whistle and stops the bus, even if it happens to be in the middle of a dense forest. Trains are better. The inspector might shove you out at one station, but you can always board the next train that comes along.'

Another man interjected: 'Some people had come here yesterday; they left for Mumbai today. They had a hell of a time get-

ting here. Illiterate people, never left their village in the past – they faced a lot of difficulties on their first-ever journey. They boarded the wrong train in Solapur and reached an unfamiliar region where they could not understand the language. They were pushed out of the train by the ticket inspector, and could not make enquiries of the people around. They remained without food for a couple of days. Finally, someone who knew one of them spotted them at the station and helped them board the right train; that train brought them here.’

Through the grills on the other side of the railway station, I could see a long queue in front of the reservation counter – a mixed crowd of ticket touts, office peons come to buy tickets for their bosses, soldiers moving about with travel warrants in their hands and routine travellers. One can book a sleeper months in advance, and yet the display board on the counter showed rows of crosses indicating all berths were booked. On this side of the grill, on the other hand, I was face to face with people who had no ‘reservation’ and no demands on their time, just willing it to pass, as it would.

I bid farewell to the people I had been talking to and started walking away. Just then, it began to rain heavily and everyone started running helter-skelter in search of shelter. The women ran with their aluminium utensils – blackened with soot – towards a nearby shed. Men scampered with whatever clothes they could grab to the Third Class waiting room. This increased the pressure on the crowd already inside the room. Everyone wanted to enter the station in a hurry and that created a mild panic at the gate where the ticket inspector stood. In sheer desperation, he called for help from the railway police. A small group of people in civilian clothing playing cards in a corner responded to his call. They picked up their bamboo *lathis* and started lashing out at the crowd trying to enter the station shed. They also used these sticks as barriers to prevent people rushing towards the railway platform. The rain outside had increased in intensity.

After half an hour the rain subsided.

The crowd, now soaking wet, returned to its original spot, only to find the place drenched with water. Some of the people took

out old rags and began to wipe the water off the ground. The families that had occupied slots near the dirty wall before the rain had struck now took advantage of the confusion and inched towards cleaner parts. This gave rise to little quarrels between the would-be encroachers and the earlier occupants.

I had parked my scooter some distance away. As I pushed the ignition key into the slot, I found yet another displaced family squatting right in front of me. Mother, father and three children, huddled together like sheep. The man was staring vacantly into space; the woman was rummaging around in her gunny bag. *Batate-vadya!* the six year-old boy teased his younger brother and laughed merrily. ‘Coca-Cola!’ retorted the younger child. They must have first heard these words only after arriving in the city.

I could not bear to hear that laughter. Were these merry children aware that they had lost the roof over their heads forever, and that they were travelling along a path of uncertainty and debasement?



I visited Latur, in Osmanabad district. There I saw many people carrying tin sheets on their heads to the market – previously a part of the structure of their homes, but now for sale. I witnessed similar sights in Udgir. I went to the interior villages and found that rats had created havoc there. ‘The rats have proliferated because of the “rat-rain,”’ the locals told me.

‘Doesn’t this “rat-rain” visit your village every year?’ I wanted to know.

‘Of course, but soon after this rain we get the “cat-rain” that eliminates all the rats. This time round, the “cat-rain” hasn’t come at all.’

I was baffled by this explanation and, seeing my confusion, one of the villagers came to my rescue. ‘When the rain following the sowing season is scanty, rats proliferate,’ he clarified.

These rats have now fattened up and their numbers have grown. They come and sit on the roads, only to get crushed under speed-

ing trucks. The rats can also be killed by endrin, a chemical pesticide. The crows that feed on these rats in turn die.

Agricultural operations in the entire district of Osmanabad have come to a standstill. This is the fourth consecutive year of drought here. One can see stunted crops all around. The crops await the rain; the village-folk sit idle.

The rich farmers are not affected by the drought. They are busy in their usual routine of family weddings and other social functions. It is the small farmers who are hard-hit by this calamity. Yet, they too are able to survive the disaster. The landless population, however, is totally uprooted and devastated.

'Last year when the drought struck, the Government launched some public works projects and gave us employment. This time no such projects have come up, and as a result we are starving,' a farm labourer told me.

'Then how do you survive? What do you eat?'

'By selling some of our belongings.'

'What have you sold so far?'

'Simpler to ask what remains,' said the man.

Another continued, 'I'll tell you. I could not cope any longer, so I sold one tin sheet of my house to tide over the crisis, thinking that I shall start some petty business with the money. I got twenty rupees for that and bought food for my family. That was not sufficient. I sold yet another tin sheet and even that was not enough. Finally, I had to sell the entire roofing. I made a sheet with recycled gunny bags, fixed it to the walls and thus created a roof. At present I am living in that tent, but am thinking of migrating to the nearby city any day now.'

'A farmer just can't survive without his sickle, but I had to sell that as well,' said another.

'Why make so much fuss over a sickle? I sold my turban for two rupees this morning to a Marwari trader and have been roaming around like a man in mourning ever since. What could I do? These are inauspicious acts, but when my children start crying with hunger, I cannot bear it.'

'I have just visited Latur. I have even seen some people selling the holy idols from the family shrine. What sanctity remains?' a man chipped in.

This piece of information had a very unsettling impact on the crowd gathered there. 'Holiness and sanctity have become things of the past. Now people are selling their cherished possessions like *sarees* – meant to be used for marriages. We have gone beyond shame.'

People have sold most of their possessions including brass and copper utensils, keeping aside only the essential tin- and aluminium-ware. Even clothes have been sold – *dhotis*, shirts, *sarees*, whatever they could sell, they have disposed of and are managing as best they can.

Without work and wages and unable to buy any food, they are reduced to the sub-human status of eating grass! People are using grass seeds as grain to make their daily *bhakris*. These seeds are locally called *barada*. These tiny black seeds are ground with their husks intact, to make a tasteless flour. To make these *bhakris* palatable, people mix greens, or even leaves of trees and bushes (which are not bitter) with the flour. Earlier these seeds could be harvested free of cost. Now traders arrange for them to be harvested, and then sell them for 35 paise a kilo.

When these desperate attempts to survive fail, people have no other choice but to migrate. The affected families become refugees. To leave your own village and go elsewhere is considered a humiliation. It is a blot on the traditions of the village. Families leave their homes only when they become completely destitute. They don't have locks to fix on their doors; a piece of rope has to suffice.

As these starving people leave, others who have managed to hold on – but equally impoverished – come by and ransack the unguarded houses. They decamp with the wooden shelves, beams and roof-tiles. Bricks and even stones supporting the houses disappear. An entire house vanishes in just three to four days. The devastation is so complete that if the owner were to return by chance, he would find it difficult to recognise the original site of the house he left behind.

All agricultural labourers suffer at times of famine, but the worst off are the Mahars and the Mangs (*dalits*). In a small village situated near Barshi some employment generation programmes for the drought-affected population of the region were being implemented under the Employment Guarantee Scheme. The *dalits* labourers were excluded. Asked for the reason, they said, 'If you want to get work there, you must have the required implements and tools. We don't have any.'

'Do all the workers bring the required tools with them?' I asked.

'Some do. The Panchayat has a stock of these tools left over from last year's works, but the *Sarpanch* gives them only to the people belonging to his own caste. We are *dalits*, you know,' they said.

I contacted the *Sarpanch* to verify this. 'None of those people had approached me for the tools,' he told me. When asked about this, the *dalits'* response was that no Mahar or Mang would dare approach the *Sarpanch*. What it all amounts to in the end is that the Dalits are unable to get any employment.

Some Dalits were working on a percolation tank near Osmanabad. I found that they had been managing without any food for the last 3-4 days. When asked the reason, they said, 'Wages are paid on a weekly basis. If you miss even one day, the supervisor does not pay you for the entire week. We are waiting for pay-day and coping as best we can in the meanwhile.'

Their hands were bloodstained from the rough labour.

This was the situation when the Panchayat elections were held that year amidst much fanfare, followed by the elections for the Zilla Parishad and Taluka Panchayat. The upper-caste Maratha Patils and Deshmukhs contested these elections keenly. Terror tactics were used in an attempt to get these upper caste candidates elected unopposed. In some areas, the battle lines were drawn between Marathas and Lingayats. The region has a substantial *dalit* population. Whichever party they voted for, they earned the wrath of the opposing party. There were some murders. *dalit* women were molested. The final blow was struck when the local farmers stopped

employing the Dalits for agricultural work. They were also forbidden to cut grass from the bunds. A reign of terror was let loose. Sick of this treatment, large numbers of Dalits left their villages, and set out for the nearest railway station.

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The Ganesh festival in Pune. The festive decorations were being prepared, and, at the same time, filthy, soot-blackened slums were coming up to house these displaced folk in areas like Shivajinagar and Hadapsar on the outskirts of the city. While the colourful *pandals* of Lord Ganesh were brightly illuminated, these settlements remained shrouded in darkness. Enthusiastic volunteers were forcibly extracting contributions towards the festivities, and thousands of drought victims were begging on the streets.

A shopkeeper, who would give a two-paise coin to every beggar who came to his shop, said, 'About six months ago, barely one beggar would turn up every hour; now there is at least one every five minutes.'

Citizens of Pune complain that incidents of theft have been on the rise since the arrival of these immigrants. A few days ago, a young boy was caught committing a theft in a colony where a friend of mine resides. My friend told me, 'This boy just did not know how to steal. Being a complete novice, he was easily caught. Groups of revellers from various Ganesh *mandals* are moving around at present. Having caught him, they assaulted him so badly that an elderly man from their own group had to intervene. He told them: "If you beat him further, he will die. We will be charged with murder. Stop now." Only then did they stop. The victim was pleading all the while: "Take back this soap case and towel that I stole. But don't beat me!" Yet it was only after they had injured him quite badly that they let him go.'

If you happen to see a man wearing a turban or a Gandhi cap, with a tattered gunny sack slung over his shoulder, wandering around collecting scraps of paper, you can be sure he is a drought victim. The number of such folk has increased to such an extent that one can throw a ball of paper out of the window in the cer-

tainty that it will be picked up within a few minutes. What the Pune Municipal Corporation could not do even with an expenditure of several lakhs of rupees – cleaning up the litter – has been effectively achieved by the drought!

Garbage also has its own standards and grades. The most valuable garbage is to be found near the goods depot at the railway station. Sacks of grain are loaded on to trucks here and transported into the city. During this process, some grain spills onto the ground. Every speck of grain is carefully picked out of the dirt – there is much jostling as ragpickers scramble for an opportunity to clean up the rubbish.

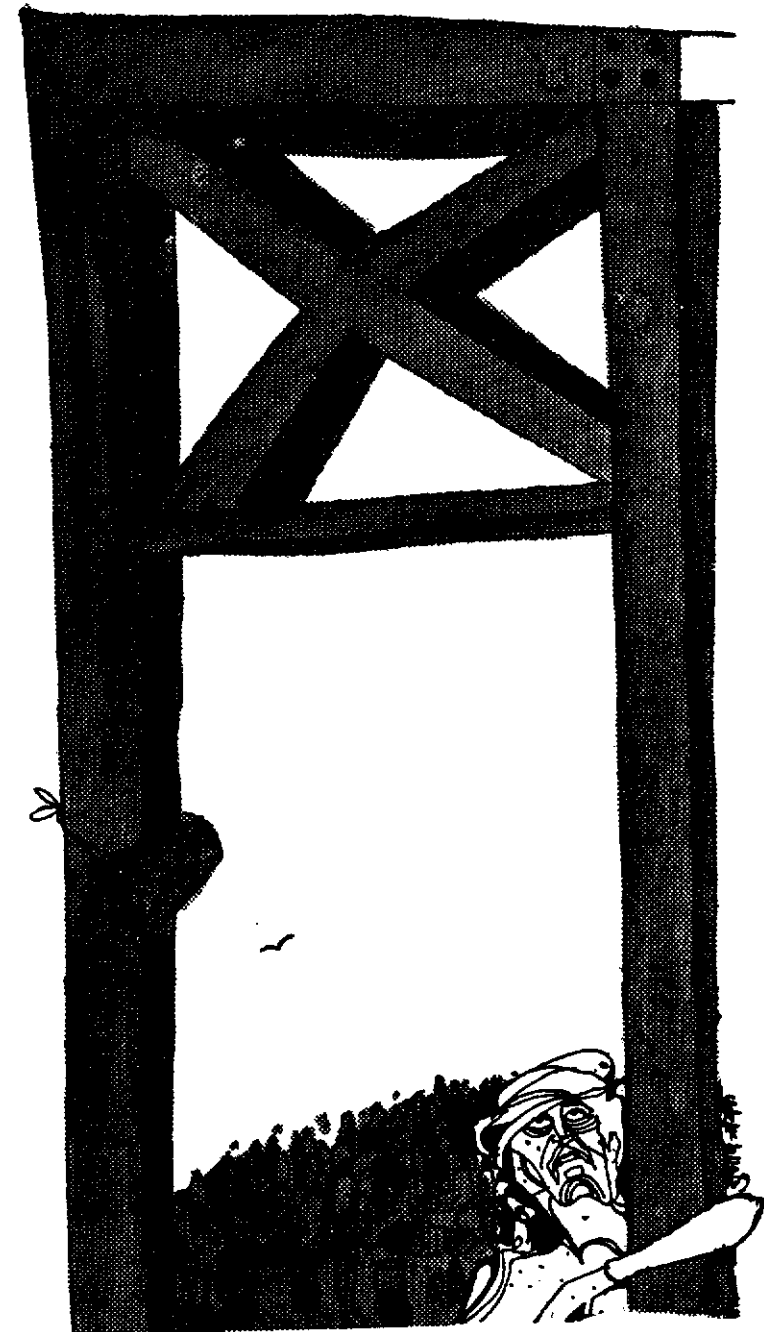
There are many *pipal* and banyan trees in and around Pune city. The drought victims use stones and nails to remove the bark of these trees. Once they have collected a fair number of bark strips, they tie them up in bundles and carry them away.

Coming from faraway undeveloped regions, these people are overwhelmed by the splendour of the Ganesh festival celebrations. The dim nights in their villages bear no comparison with these brightly-lit streets ... innumerable glimmering, sparkling, red-yellow-blue lights ... the quiet nights in the villages, and here the loud Hindi film songs blaring out of loudspeakers at every street corner ... in the village, at the shops or the village square, barely five or ten persons are to be seen ... and here this ocean of humanity.

The other day as I was walking along the road, I spotted a man with a gunny bag on his shoulder. He appeared befuddled in the midst of the raucous celebrations. Traditional *bhajans* could be heard from the Dnyaneshwar Paduka temple across the road. Hearing this music, he hurried across the road and squatted outside the temple. He remained there for a long time in great contentment.

What thoughts could have been going through his mind? Whence have I come ... where is my village ... how long will this travail last ... when will it all end ...

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After passing the westernised Cantonment area of Pune, moving down a long curved road, one comes to the heavily wooded Empress Gardens. Across the road lies a lush green expanse bounded by white railings – the racecourse. A policeman was signalling to the sparse traffic here, and I stopped. A group of syces led a row of thoroughbreds, with red race-cloths across their backs, out of the Empress Gardens, across the road and through the gates of the racecourse.

Going a little further, I could see the tops of sugarcane plants and long rows of green vegetables in the midst of lush-green farms. Farmers clad in crisp white clothes could be seen roaring up and down the dirt roads on their powerful Bullet motorcycles.

This is an enchanting area. A little further on are the farms 'Asha Baug' and 'Raj Baug' owned by the movie stars Asha Parekh and Raj Kapoor respectively. The movie 'Bobby' had been filmed at *Raj Baug*.

This is the Solapur Road. About three kilometres from Pune city, on one side of the road is a slum comprising about one thousand huts. Stones, mud, wooden planks, and tin sheets have all been used as the raw materials to construct these hovels. I could see a flock of women and children with their vessels gathered around the public tap.

Around two hundred straw huts have come up in the middle of a barbed-wire enclosure on the other side of the road. These huts have come up on this vacant plot where the Pune-Miraj railway line intersects the housing board colony.

This is where the drought victims live.

Mr. Salunke, a social worker whom I am acquainted with, lives in the 'old' slum across the road. I went to meet him. Around 30 years old, Mr. Salunke works as a watchman in the nearby Cantonment garbage dump, and is also an activist of the Socialist Party. He accompanied me to the drought victims' slum. 'Since when have these people been here?' I asked him as we walked towards the slum.

'They have been trickling in since the last seven or eight months, but there has been a large increase over the past three months,' Salunke informed me.

'Who owns this land – and who has put up the barbed wire fence around it?'

'The land is owned by one Mr. Mudaliar, and it is he who has put up the fencing. When these drought victims began to arrive here, there was no trace of the owner. Some shopkeepers started putting up tin sheds. Hearing of this, he came here and ordered the demolition of the huts. We intervened and appealed to the owner, "These are poor folk. They have been forced here by circumstances. Once it rains in their villages, they will return." After some discussion, it was agreed that the existing huts would not be demolished, and no new ones would be allowed to come up. The owner has employed a watchman. The moment an occupant leaves for a few days, the watchman demolishes the vacant hut. A woman living in one of these huts with her daughter went to visit somebody in a nearby village, and the watchman demolished the hut. When she returned, there was nothing left. She protested, but the guard drove her out.'

'Why didn't you complain?'

'The watchman has a bunch of goons at his beck and call. He also has the support of the youth from our own slum. The people from our slum do not want these drought victims here either.'

'But why?'

'They are perceived as "outsiders" by the "locals" living in our locality. The people from my area resent the help I extend to these drought victims.'

I cast a glance at the 'original' slum where Salunke lived. The slum resembled any other mixed settlement in the city. The residents here are also refugees – but they are 'old' refugees and these others are recent.

I crossed the road and approached the barbed wire compound. Salunke met some people on the way and was left behind. I walked on and arrived at the gate to the enclosure. I was not sure whether the residents of this slum would talk to me. But as I reached the gate, some 30 people came rushing towards me. Dark-complexioned men, with stubbled chins; some with turbans, others bare-headed; with dark shadows underneath bulging eyes. Their skin was blackened by the sun and had lost its lustre. Not a single man had a *bidi* in his mouth. Some of them were bare-chested, trying to cover themselves with their hands. The few clothes they had were tattered and torn. One man wore a shirt with just one sleeve, its collar and plastic buttons intact, but with the belly completely exposed. In fact, that shirt was nothing but one sleeve and a collar, and yet the man wearing it acted as if it were a complete shirt. Others wore torn *dhotis* and had bunched parts of them into knots in an attempt to cover up the larger of these holes, but knees and emaciated limbs peeped through.

They all had a desperate look about them.

'Where's the work, Sir,' asked one, scratching his unshaven face.

I did not understand. 'Sir, I will come for just four rupees,' said another.

A third broke in, 'My family has been without food for two days, I'm willing to accept three rupees. Let's go. Where do you want me to come? To a factory, to work under a mason, or on a farm?'

A fourth said, 'Come on, I'll come for one and a half rupees! Don't listen to what these others say.'

Arguments flared up. Meanwhile, Salunke arrived and asked the group to be silent. 'This man has not come to employ you,' he told them, 'he has come here to understand your predicament.' The men were somewhat displeased. Salunke was acquainted with a few of them. They spread some torn gunny sacks on the ground in front of one of the huts and we sat down.

Almost all the people around were Mahars or Mangs – Dalits. There were hardly any (upper-caste) Marathas. They had sold all their possessions and taken the train to Pune. Disembarking at Loni Kalbhor railway station, they had walked up to Hadapsar and finally reached this slum in search of shelter.

They told me that as soon as they wake up every morning, they set out of their shanties and stand along the roadside. The farmers in this area come and hire them for digging or other odd jobs on their farms. The usual wage in this area is about four rupees and fifty paise per day. But nowadays these farmers hire them for just three rupees a day. In the end, they actually pay them only one and a half rupees. One of the victims protested this treatment and was thrown out by the farmer for all his pains. 'The farmer abused me a lot,' the labourer told me. He said, "Go. Do what you want." Now what could I do? Who would be willing to stand up for me?"

Masons usually require some assistants, but on account of inflation and the current cement shortage, very little construction work is going on, and thus even this employment avenue has been shut off. A few persons are hired to clean the machinery on the weekly factory holiday.

All these jobs put together cannot provide employment to even half the slum's working population. Those who get work today are not sure whether they will get any tomorrow. They generally prefer to work as farm labour – the wages may be low, but at least they are in contact with some activity with which they are familiar. Besides, being well versed in this work, they do not have to suffer the complaints of irate employers, as they normally have to when taken on for other kinds of work. Further, one can get hold of some straw or grass from the farm to add to the roof of the hut, as well as some leafy vegetables for the cooking-pot. Hence, those who are lucky to get agricultural work experience the kind of thrill an educated youth must get were he to procure employment in a multinational corporation!

'How do those who are unable to get work survive?' I asked.

'As ragpickers ...' was the reply.

A ragpicker sets out at daybreak with a gunny sack on his shoulder. After spending the day stuffing whatever he can find into the sack, the ragpicker returns at nightfall. The following morning is spent sorting the scrap into categories, and it is then taken to either the Marwari or Muslim scrap-dealer in the slum across the road. One gets paid better rates in the city market, but it is not worth the amount of time spent in getting there. One is therefore compelled to sell the scrap across the road.

Paper is the most valued kind of scrap. It has twin benefits: the rates are higher and the weight on one's shoulders is less. Paper of all shapes and sizes is picked up from wherever it is found. Damp pieces of paper are dried in the sun. One makes bundles of the paper and then sells them. Even soiled pieces of paper are retrieved from dustbins and garbage dumps, and carefully cleaned at home.

After paper, it is tin scrap that fetches a good price in the market. Tin pieces, nails, strips – the rate for all these is 20 paise per kilo. A rusted piece is worthless. Then comes glass. Pieces of bottle, broken glass panes and bulbs are sold at 15 paise per kilo. Bones figure lowest in the scale – at 10 paise a kilo. If the bones are not dry, then they are worth only 5 paise a kilo! One has to search in the forest for scattered animal bones, or wait patiently in front of a non-vegetarian restaurant, collect the garbage, and then pick bones out of it.

A ragpicker told me, 'It was summer when we first came here – a good season to collect scrap. At that time we could collect or dig out a lot of it. But now the rains have begun and waist-high "Congress" (*parthenium*) grass has sprung up all around. First one must uproot these weeds and then search for scrap. Uprooting the grass consumes half our energy and it is only after this is done that we can search for scrap. After all this hard work, one may find nothing at all – the effort is wasted.'

'How much ground do you have to cover daily?'

'It is difficult to tell. Nowadays so many people are gathering scrap that it has become difficult to find a bit of paper or spot a piece of glass.'

On account of the current shortage of paper, people no longer throw away scraps of paper as casually as they used to. The rates for old newspapers have risen, so old newspapers are carefully stored. Even in offices, paper with one side blank is reused. Paper is stuck on old envelopes and these are then reused. The number of brochures from pharmaceutical companies to doctors has dropped considerably. Political leaflets are being printed only in small numbers. Even bus and cinema tickets are being printed in smaller sizes.

A man narrated his experience: 'I returned from Mumbai last week. When I was there, I heard that one could find large quantities of waste paper in the Bandra garbage dump. With great hope, I decided to reach there before other ragpickers did. I started out early under the impression that it was already dawn. When I reached the dump, I discovered that it was only 2.30 a.m. I had to squat in front of the gate. The watchman told me, "Why are you sitting here at this time of night. The police will take you for a thief and arrest you." I moved some distance away and dozed for a while. At 4 a.m. I woke up. As soon as the garbage trucks began to dump their loads in the yard, I rushed in. Eight or ten trucks had come and gone and I was not able to gather much paper. The guard told me, "You won't find anything here. The municipal waste workers with the trucks pick out the paper scraps in the garbage before the truck gets here, tie it up into bundles and then sell it." I gave up and left. I spent the whole day walking around collecting waste paper, and finally returned home around 10 p.m.'

His day's earnings after all this effort were just 60 paise.

'But do you come across any problem in gathering this waste paper or is it easy?' I wanted to know.

A man in his fifties raised his hand. I asked him to narrate his tale, and getting up, he spoke, 'Sir, as I was picking up waste paper near a bungalow, the owner came out, caught hold of me and said, "It was you who stole my brass tap. Now I will hand you over to the police." Touching his feet, I pleaded, "Sir, I belong to a respectable family. I wouldn't do something like that. If you are not convinced, go ahead and check my sack." But he was in no mood to listen. He took me inside his bungalow and wanted to call the

police. For half an hour, I pleaded with him. Finally he relented and said, "I am letting you go this time, but if I ever see you in this locality again, I shall break your limbs." He finally let me go. I relaxed only when I was back home in the midst of my family again.'

One individual was sitting by himself some distance away with his head lowered and eyes closed. When he did eventually raise his head and open his eyes, I saw that both his eyes were misted over with trachoma. Noticing me looking at him, a man sitting nearby said, 'Just look at the condition of his eyes. It is not possible for him to work, but he has to feed his children. He too goes out to collect scrap.'

'But how do you work with your eyes in this condition?' I asked the man.

He waved his hands in a deprecatory gesture. 'When I go out into the sunshine, everything goes dark. Yet there is no choice but to continue working.'

'Scrap is becoming scarce now; how will you cope with this situation?' I asked.

One of the men replied, 'Let me tell you what I do: we don't get scrap in the city any longer, so I walk 10-15 miles towards Loni. I return home after 2-3 days. But I manage to collect scrap worth Rs 8-10 per trip. That gives me some money to feed my family.'

Salunke interjected, 'These people also come to the garbage dump where I work. There are about half a dozen pits where garbage is dumped. These people dig through the garbage in the hope of finding something. Nearby is a field which was used as a garbage dump during the days of the British. These people keep on digging up the ground there in the hope of finding some scrap material. Due to their incessant digging, the entire area is scarred with pits and the trucks carrying garbage can no longer pass that way. Finally, my boss got very angry and ordered that these people be prevented from entering the yard. But I can see their plight. I allow them inside without my boss knowing. But they continue dig-

ging up the ground and I have to explain that to my boss. After we finish here, you can come and see the situation with your own eyes.'

'Okay, let's go there and have a look,' I said, and we set off.

The excavation of the dumped garbage had left deep pits within the garbage area. Space had been left between the pits for the garbage trucks to pass. 'How can trucks pass along here?' Salunke asked.

I looked. The sides of the pits had caved in due to the holes dug in the piles of garbage. The passageway left between the pits had collapsed. There was a broken piece of chinaware on one of the piles. I picked it up and asked Salunke, 'Isn't this piece of any use?'

'Do you think you would have found this piece here if it were of any value?' Salunke said.

The field which had been used as a garbage dump in pre-Independence times was situated close by. It was covered with 'Congress' grass. Salunke entered the thick growth and called out to me. I faced some difficulty in reaching him. He was standing next to a pit about eight feet wide and ten feet deep. 'Look, this is the kind of desperate digging that goes on. They spend hours digging such pits in the hope of finding some pieces of glass or metal. Sometimes they are successful, sometimes not.'

'But what implements do these people use for digging?' I wanted to know.

'Ordinary sickles. They can't afford pickaxes.'

As I started to move in his direction, Salunke warned: 'Sir, don't move forward; there may be a crater somewhere for all we know. The pits are all hidden under the "Congress" grass.'

We left the yard. Looking back, I was reminded of an archaeological excavation site. These scrap collectors have one peculiarity in common with archaeologists – they are both engaged in a kind of search. This too is a form of exploration, as is archaeology!

As we walked back towards the slum, the same group of people still accompanying us, I asked them, 'How do those among you who are unable to work manage?'

'The older folk don't take up labour work or collect scrap; they beg. They take the children along with them. The sight of children sometimes strikes a chord in an almsgiver. Look at this old man, he goes out begging daily,' one of them replied.

'Baba, how much do you get on an average day?' I asked the old man.

'It is difficult to say. But I get enough to feed the children.'

An old woman spoke up: 'No one gives alms these days. Even if we reach at mealtimes, people just shut the door in our faces and continue to eat. A woman said to me, "Go back to where you came from. We are ourselves short of food and fuel; how are we to give you anything?"'

A man who appeared to be in his forties said, 'I too go out and beg when no work is available. Once a man set his dog on me. I ran for my life, or else that dog would have bitten me in the calf. Another man asked me "You look fit and healthy, why don't you work for a living?"' I nodded and left the scene. There was no point in explaining.'

By this time we had reached the rear section of the slum. Some women were working inside the huts. Their hair was dry and matted; it had obviously not been washed or oiled for a long time. Their *sarees* were covered with patches. The clothes of some were so badly torn that their thighs were showing through. One woman's blouse was torn right across the back. An old woman came out of a hut, with a two-foot wide piece of cloth wrapped round her waist.

'This is the reason I don't like to come here nowadays. I can't bear to see the plight of the women. When I have some work here, I call the men to meet me outside the compound,' Salunke whispered in my ear.

The huts were around six feet by four in size. Two bamboo poles were used as vertical supports with another pole laid horizontally over them. Sugarcane leaves strewn on top served as roofs. Bundles of the dried 'Congress' grass growing all around were used as partitions within the huts. The insides of one of the huts were lined with jute sacking. 'From where did you manage to get this

sacking?' I asked. The man replied, 'These pieces of sacking were being used to cover lumps of jaggery in a grocery shop. I asked the shopkeeper whether I could have them. He agreed. I took those pieces to the nearby canal, scrubbed them till all the jaggery was washed off, dried them and then started using them as walls for my hut.'

I also saw a tent-like structure, supported merely with two bamboos with a bed sheet cast over them as a roof. This hut had no walls. I could not see any *chulha* or cooking utensils inside. 'Whom does this hut belong to?' I asked a man standing nearby.

'That is ours. My brother got married recently. He and his wife sleep here at night,' he informed me.

'Where is the bridegroom?' I asked.

'Here he stands,' he pointed.

The groom stood there in embarrassment, wearing a tattered *dhoti*, trying to cover his bare chest with his arms.

The occupants of some huts were busy cooking. The more prosperous households had a pile of several *bajra bhakris* (unleavened bread made of pearl millet) before them. Some households were using tree bark as fuel; others were making do with 'Congress' grass. When asked about the cooking fuel, one man said, 'Tree bark costs 35 paise a kilo. You need at least two kilos to cook a meal. "Congress" grass is free. But it is easily combustible and rapidly flares up. Our huts have very low roofs covered with "Congress" grass; the roof catches fire easily. Three or four huts have already been gutted.'

'How do you extinguish the blaze when this happens?'

'Once a hut catches fire, we drag it to some unoccupied corner lest the entire slum catch fire.'

'One of the huts caught fire on account of a passing train,' a man told me.

'How did that happen?'

'A spark from the steam engine flew onto the roof of one of the huts and there was a sudden fire. We all put out the fire. But in



the process, we used up all the water available and on the following day the entire slum did not have water even for cooking.'

'Why?'

'From where could we get it? There is a public tap in front of the "old" slum across the road. But the residents of that slum themselves form long queues for the water. They finish only around midnight and then the tap is free till about 4 a.m. During that period we stand in queues for the water. Around 4 a.m. the residents of the "old" slum return.'

Salunke broke in, 'These people have to undergo extreme hardship. The whole day is spent in hard labour, and after returning home they have to stand in a queue for water. Nobody gets much sleep. Besides, they have to collect the water in small vessels, glasses, and cans; they have no larger vessels for water.'

'Without being able to store much water, how do you manage to bathe?' I wanted to know.

'Bathing ...' one of them mumbled and laughed. 'There is a canal about one and a half miles away. You need about two hours to go there, bathe and return. And during that time, one may miss an opportunity to get some work. No, we don't bathe for months at a stretch.'

'Do you have to pay any rent for your hut?' I asked one of them.

'No, not at all! I have purchased this hut,' he replied with a note of pride.

'How much did you pay and to whom?' I asked in surprise.

'When I first got here, another man was about to leave. He sold me this hut for seven rupees,' he said.

I saw an old man and a woman with two girls sitting out in the open with a bundle near them.

'Don't they have a hut?' I asked.

'No, they live in the open,' a man said.

The old man cast me an apprehensive glance, but then seemed reassured by the presence of Salunke and the other residents of the slum. 'Baba, what did you do when it rained heavily last night? Where did you sleep?' I asked him.

He rummaged through his sack and brought out a torn piece of plastic, barely two feet long and said, 'I covered myself with this.'

'And what did the others in your family do?'

He brought out a tattered quilt and a few pieces of sacking. He spread the quilt out before me. The arm-length piece of quilt had a large hole in the middle. Bits and pieces of cloth were hanging out even where the quilt was not actually torn.

I could see the old man's wrinkled face through the hole in the quilt.

It was like a scene from a highbrow 'new-wave' film.

'Why did none of you offer shelter to this old man when he was soaking out here last night?' I asked the others standing there.

'How could we? Where is the space in our huts? Besides, do you think you won't get drenched sitting inside our huts? The water inevitably drips through the grass roofs. The only difference is that if there are two drops outside, there is one inside the hut,' one of them said.

'What do you do when it rains heavily?'

'In case we are able to predict that it will rain, we leave somebody here to guard the hut and go to the Hadapsar vegetable market yard to sleep. But if the rain comes without any warning, we all sit wide awake in our huts and wait for it to subside.'

A young boy was walking along with us. He had a broken plastic whistle in his mouth. His father had probably found it when he picked through his daily collection of scrap. I watched the boy: he was trying very hard to coax some sound out of the whistle. Salunke said, 'These children suffer the most. An adult copes somehow or the other, but what is a child to do?'

A man stepped forward and lifted the boy's vest. His back was covered with small pus-filled boils. 'All the children have this problem. It is caused by the bites of fleas which breed in the "Congress" grass.'

Another man brought his son forward and showed us his back. The boy had scratched the skin right off his back.

I asked, 'Why don't you give this boy some treatment? If Sassoon Hospital is too far away, you could take him to Sane Guruji Hospital in Hadapsar. You can get free medicines there as well.'

'Sir, when are we to go? Our entire day is spent in a scramble to earn enough to live on.'

'Many infants in this slum die. They sleep on the damp floor. They die. A child dies here every second day,' Salunke said.

I could not believe this. I asked the people standing around whether any of them had lost a child. A couple of people raised their hands. One of them told me, 'My child died the day before yesterday. He had diarrhoea. I didn't bother too much – it will stop sooner or later, I thought. One day the child died after having many loose motions.'

'My wife delivered a baby, which died within five or six days,' said another. 'She had no milk in her breasts for the baby. And where from can we get hold of any other milk? The baby cried incessantly for milk. How is a baby to cope when grown-ups are at the end of their tether?'

'These people come to me when their children die,' said Salunke, 'as I help them to obtain the necessary death certificates from the municipal authorities so that the child can be legally buried. There have been as many as 35 deaths in these 200 households during the past three or four months. I have the records with me. Nowadays these people bury their dead without obtaining the certificate. For what do they need a certificate? There must be about ten such unregistered deaths and of some old people as well. Customarily they cremate their dead, but from where are they to get the wood for that? These days even adults are buried in this slum.'

I had traversed the entire slum. We were all now on the side of the road bordering the slum.

'Don't you feel like returning to your villages?' I asked. 'There is news of rain in your region; the newspapers say that the government has started works under the Employment Guarantee Scheme there.'

One of them said, 'Do you think we enjoy living in this hell? Back home, we had to toil but we lived with dignity. Here, everyone treats us as if we were filth. If you sit somewhere, you are told to go away; once you go somewhere else, another person shoos you away. People just shout at us whatever we do and drive us away wherever we go. We don't read newspapers, but if what you say is true and work is available there, would people from our village flock to this city as they are doing even today?' Everyone nodded in agreement. 'And just suppose, works have really started, then the only ones who will benefit are the kith and kin of the *Patil*. These people are marked present even when they sit at home; as for us, even though we are willing to toil, we are told there is no work.'

The individual who had spoken first now continued, 'We sold all our possessions and came here. Now if you were to say that there is work in our village and send us back – and then we find that there is no work after all, we would not have the capability to come back here once again. We would die there. Here we can at least beg and survive, but back there even that is not possible. If we were to die, no one would care to even cast a handful of earth upon our corpses!'

'We had taken a *morcha* of these folk to the Chief Minister,' Salunke informed me. He assured us, 'We will take up works under the Employment Guarantee Scheme in your villages. We will even pay for your return journey, will you go?' There these people agreed but now they refuse. They have a point; they have no faith left in the government.'

'Political workers like you have been working for our welfare. We know that and therefore we follow you,' one of the men told

Salunke. 'But we cannot stick by you till the very end. The moment our children start wailing due to hunger, we go crazy. We will do anything to raise money, sell whatever we have, work for a paltory wage; somehow or the other we will stuff some food into the children's mouths and quieten them. We can't bear their tears ...'

I could see his point. In his own idiom, he was trying to say that one must have some minimal economic power for political consciousness to arise.

I bid them all farewell and started back with Salunke. Out of curiosity I asked him, 'I wonder what happens to the young girls here in this environment of deprivation. Aren't they likely to become prostitutes?'

He laughed. 'Even if you want to get into that "business", you must be reasonably personable. You have just seen the condition of these women. Who would want them? Some of these young girls come to the public tap to fetch water. Young men from our slum tease and torment them. After all, they are "free". I try to keep some control over the boys when I am around.'

After we reached Salunke's hut, a few political workers from the slum gathered there. One of them said, 'These new people have ruined our livelihood. The municipal corporator of this region negotiated with the local farmers and pressurised them to agree to a daily wage of Rs 5. Then these people came here. The landlords took advantage of this and began to employ them at lower wages. These folk are so poor that we couldn't even bring ourselves to tell the landlords not to employ them. But the people from our own slum are upset with us because they think we take the side of these drought victims. The situation has become really bad after the problem with that shopkeeper.'

'What problem?'

'There are four shops in our slum. The shopkeepers cheat these new folk. They charge more for everything. They dupe them when they weigh the goods. But who will stand up for these folk when there is a dispute? These people also sell the scrap they collect at the scrap shop run by the Muslim dealer. He pays up just half the

amount due – if 8 annas are due, he pays 4 annas and says that he will pay the rest the following day. On the following day, he refuses to acknowledge the debt. We complained to him about this, and now he has threatened to kill us.'

'On the first day that these folk were here, they squatted outside our slum,' related another. 'The next morning they shifted to the plot across the road. But the woman who owns this plot of land charged them eight annas rent each for that day. Some generosity!'

Salunke's hut was about ten feet by twenty in size. It was constructed of mud and stones. It had a tin roof and, above all, you could stand erect inside it. Pictures of various deities hung on the walls; there was also a photograph of Salunke and his wife. Compared to the huts of the folk opposite, there were many superfluous items. Ordinarily, I would feel depressed by the poverty of these slum dwellers. Today, though, when compared to the folk across the road, they struck me as secure and prosperous.

A *sadhu* with a beard and a topknot had come and squatted outside Salunke's hut. A flock of women was sitting grouped around him, asking him questions. Various rituals were in progress – lemons were being cut and *kumkum* smeared on mounds of grain. This *sadhu*, I thought to myself, won't go to the slum across the road. He knows that one needs a certain amount of resources even to practice a life of renunciation.

I said to Salunke, 'We must do something for these drought victims. I will contact some doctors and medical service organisations. I will also contact the people who arrange for distribution of bread in slums on behalf of the Department of Social Welfare. Let's see if something can be done.'

'It would be nice if we could help them in any way,' Salunke agreed.

I bid Salunke farewell and returned home.



The plot opposite the Pune railway station was totally empty. Where had the drought victims gone? Had they gone back to their villages?

I crossed the bridge and went towards the Raja Bahadur Mills. There was nobody there either. There were a few policemen standing around. I couldn't understand what had happened.

I started exploring the by-lanes and found all those folk about half a furlong away, huddled together on another empty plot of land. They told me their tale, 'Last night the police arrived and used their *lathis* to drive us away. They began to throw away our possessions and destroyed the huts of some of the people. They forced us away. We came here.'

'But why did they do that? I am sure you would have left quietly if they had requested you to do so.'

'Who knows ... they said some important leader is coming, so go away!'

Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, the President of India, was due to visit Pune for three days. Being his first official tour after having become President, all efforts were being made to ensure its success. He was also to inaugurate the Davis Cup match between India and Russia, which was to be held in Pune.

Some assurances had been given, compromises were worked out with disgruntled elements, and the possibility of demonstrations during the President's visit had been eliminated. Every effort had been taken to ensure that the President's gaze would not fall upon any unseemly or unbecoming sights. With this in mind, all the settlements of the drought victims in the environs of the entire roadway from the Airport to the Raj Bhavan via the RTO had been removed overnight.

The President of India would now be able to travel along a clean and elegant road!

Of Beasts and Men

Pune city is expanding rapidly. New buildings are springing up on every street. Construction is proceeding at a swift pace; a person who leaves town for a few days finds his own neighbourhood looking unfamiliar upon his return. The level of activity all around has increased. In a village, one gets habituated to seeing just a few people around at any given time.

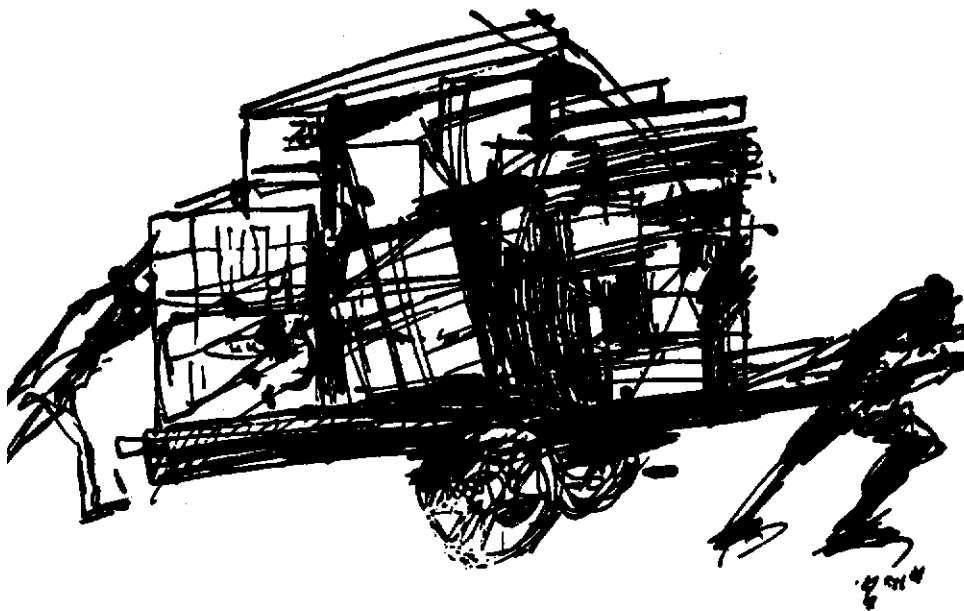
But here one's gaze is fatigued by the vast multitudes. One gets the impression that one is in the midst of a herd of cattle. But

then, it is these very people who have created the city and its bustle. Some live in slums amidst pools of stagnant water; some live in hotels with swimming pools. Each one has a different appetite: some like the *bhaji pao* sold by handcarts at street corners while others prefer Udipi cuisine. There are people to patronise Punjabi or even Chinese food. And then there are those who are drawn to the half-eaten, decaying left-overs in the garbage cans of these Punjabi and Chinese restaurants.

Life in this city flourishes, in diverse ways. Snatch what you can, from wherever you can, by whatever means – such is the law of the city. The higher a man has reached on the social ladder, the more pronounced is his ability to prosper in this fashion; the means within his grasp to grab whatever he can are that much more considerable. Likewise, as one goes down the social scale, one encounters increasing vulnerability. Below a certain threshold, even that is extinguished. And all that remains is a brutish animal existence.

One such animal that toils day and night in the service of this city is the coolie. It is the coolies who cart on their backs the cement, wood and tiles that are required in the construction of these tall, attractive, well-designed buildings. It is they who unload round the clock the sacks of grain, jaggery, sugar, and chillies wanted by the hotels to serve their range of delicious food. They transfer the materials into trucks and then stack them in the warehouses. These illiterate folk also haul huge rolls of newsprint from one truck to another, in order that the urban class may know what is happening in the world. They transport bags of fertiliser wanted by the wealthy farmers of the district to cultivate sugarcane and other cash crops and by the city's enthusiastic gardeners to grow roses in their gardens. Everything that enters this city passes through their hands.

But nobody spares a thought for the coolies and their lives. And why should anyone bother? If a coolie dies, carrying sacks on his back, so be it; there are thousands willing to take his place. A bare-foot coolie drags his handcart in the scorching sun. The tarred surface of the road has become soft due to the heat, and the wheels of the loaded handcart keep getting stuck. His wife, drenched in



sweat and her face blackened by the sun, pushes the cart from behind. At the same time, along the same road, luxuriously upholstered cars with tinted glass and curtains over the windows pass soundlessly by. The women who ride in them wear oversized sunglasses as a defence against the glaring sunlight. What possible connection could there be between the two types of vehicles and the people associated with each of them? Why would the lady with sunglasses even look out through the window of her vehicle?



Bhavani Peth, a locality in the heart of Pune.

The traffic is chaotic. A large number of trucks and bullock carts are stacked on the road which is lined with old houses and the occasional plush four-storied mansion. Every building has trading offices on the ground floor, furnished with *charpais* and their mattresses and bolsters. The traders, dressed in muslin, wearing spectacles with gold frames, are speaking animatedly on their phones in a mixture of Marwari and Gujarati, enquiring about market prices and negotiating deals with other traders in Kolkata, Hyderabad and Bangalore. Sacks are being unloaded from trucks parked nonchalantly in the middle of the road. Groups of coolies, clad in coarse half-sleeved shirts and jute jackets, scurry around with the sickle-shaped hooks they use for lifting heavy loads. While some men do the carrying, others stack the sacks in the shops or the antechambers in the rear. Some are engaged in loading the sacks onto their handcarts; others ride atop loaded bullock-carts. A few wear Gandhi caps; all are barefeet.

I meet Gyanba Jadhav, a man in his late forties. He carries a vermillion sandal-paste mark smeared across his forehead. He works as a coolie in the jaggery trade. I walk with him to the traditional jaggery market.

A number of trucks are parked all around, each loaded with blocks of jaggery. Dried sugarcane pulp lies scattered on the road. We approach one of the trucks. Seeing Gyanba – a veteran of the jaggery trade – the other coolies gather around. Each sports on his head a hard roll made of old jute bags, held firmly in place with a

piece of cloth, to cushion the weight of the blocks of jaggery they carry. A piece of cloth attached to the head roll, helps cover the back. The hands, legs and shoulders are coated with jaggery. We motion them to carry on; work resumes.

One coolie standing on the truck, picks up a block of jaggery and sends it rolling downwards. Crouched below with his back against the truck is another coolie, in position to have the block hoisted onto his back. A third coolie, standing by his side, controls the movement of the block as it rolls down. His role is also to help place the block on the back of the second coolie, who now reaches behind himself and deftly shifts the block into position. A second block of jaggery comes rolling down and it is placed on top of the first block, resting almost around the middle of the coolie's back. And then a third block arrives as well: I watch in trepidation as this block is placed on top of the second. It has reached the coolie's neck. The coolie then sets off at a half-run, crosses the road and enters the adjacent shop – carrying the three blocks against his back, supported only by the hands held tight behind his back.

'How much does each block of jaggery weigh?' I ask Gyanba.

'Twenty-five kilos,' he replies.



Gyanba motions to one of the coolies. He comes to a halt, panting heavily. Gyanba shows me the coolie's palms. The skin has peeled off; some parts are bleeding. 'This is what happens to your hands when you work with jaggery,' Gyanba informs me. 'Jaggery is hard – the farmers add some kind of chemical to harden it. It's due to this chemical that the skin peels off our hands and they begin to burn. We dare not touch spicy food. It makes eating very painful.'

The coolie, wiping his sweat, adds: 'Sir, when we go for a cup of tea to a hotel, we cannot hold the cup in our hands.'

He gets back to work.

There is a group of bedraggled children jostling around the truck. They are busy gathering the fragments of jaggery that fall to the ground as the blocks are hauled around. The coolies have to shoo them away often, as they keep getting in their way. When they get a chance, they stealthily reach inside the truck to see if they can grab slightly larger fragments. The coolies, each loaded with three blocks of jaggery also have to be alert for scooters and bicycles whizzing along the road. Added to hazards are the children. The coolies yell at them. But the children are least concerned – they throw stones at the backs of the coolies and scamper off. Utterly helpless and irritated, the coolies will complain to the owner of the shop. 'What can I do? You sort it out yourselves,' he says.

A truck is parked on the adjacent side of the road. We walk up to it and look inside. There are no blocks of jaggery in it. Instead, there are stacks of gunny bags with viscous, sticky black jaggery oozing out of them. While the coolies carry these sticky gunny bags on their heads, the dark liquid spills onto their bodies. Swarms of huge red flies, each decorated with a yellow spot in its middle, hover around the gunny bags in the truck; they buzz around the coolies as they transport the bags to the shops.

'This is "flat" jaggery,' says Gyanba. 'Working with it is terrible. If one of these flies were to bite your hand, it will swell. One can't work for four to five days after that. The flies don't bite you unless you touch them, but that is unavoidable in the rush of work.'

'But what makes the jaggery melt so easily?'

'It's the contact with the air. The upper stacks of jaggery blocks are unloaded as soon as the truck gets here. But the lower blocks get crushed and begin to melt within the truck itself. The jaggery sticks firmly to the floor of the truck, so much so that we have to use crowbars to remove it. We don't get paid extra for this additional labour,' Gyanba informs me.

Both of us enter a shop across the street. A signboard above says, 'Rameshchandra Shobhachandra Tatia.' On one side is a wooden platform. On it are a bunch of mattresses and a desk. A *munim* sits cross-legged at the desk writing his accounts in large red ledgers. He looks up as we enter, but seeing Gyanba, thrusts his head back into the ledgers.

Except for the wooden platform, the entire floor of the shop is covered with melted jaggery. When I step on it, my *chappals* sink an inch deep. I move forward, using the wall as support. One corner of the shop's antechamber has a stack of gunny-bags used to store the 'flat' jaggery. A swarm of flies hovers around it. On the other side of the room is a pile of jaggery blocks. A couple of coolies are engaged in re-arranging the blocks. Gyanba observes: 'The entire heap could collapse if one of the blocks in the lower layers cracks up. A coolie could end up losing his limb, and sometimes, even his life.'

A couple of coolies are busy scraping the sticky jaggery off the floor with the help of an old can. The results are collected in a large tin. One of the coolies finds a dead rat trapped in the jaggery. He nonchalantly picks it up by its tail and throws it into the gutter outside the shop. I am nauseated by the sight. 'We have to do all this dirty work ourselves,' says Gyanba. 'This rat has died recently, which is why it could be picked up like that and thrown out. But quite often, the rat could be dead like that and not discovered for months. In that case, it gradually melts into the jaggery. When scraping up the jaggery, all we may find is the skeleton.'

'What happens to this jaggery?' I ask.

They all laugh, with knowing glances. I fail to understand.

One of them enlightens me: 'The jaggery is sold to the owners of illicit liquor stills.'

'But how can they use this? There are dead rats in it!'

The coolie laughs again and tells me, 'It is precisely this type of jaggery that the distillers want.'

'You know this, and yet you consume that liquor!' Gyanba reprimands the coolies.

Crestfallen, they get back to work.

On our way back, Gyanba shows me many more such shops with godowns behind them. The floors are invariably covered with the same sticky mess and the coolies, each carrying three blocks on his back, have to negotiate the treacherous surface. The lanes leading to a few of the shops are so narrow that the elbows of the coolies scrape against the adjoining walls as they pass. The lanes themselves are full of potholes. A few godowns are located on the first floor. The staircases are narrow and steep.

Back on the main road, we come to a temple. Gyanba calls out to a few coolies and we all enter the temple. 'This is the coolies' temple,' Gyanba explains. 'It was built by a coolie, a long time ago. Now the owner of the land has laid claim to it. But this continues to be our customary meeting-place.'

About a dozen coolies gather there and begin to speak about the woes of working in the jaggery trade. 'This work destroys our backs,' says one.

He removes his shirt and exhibits his bare back. I notice dark patches like stripes running across the upper and lowermost sections of his back.

Another coolie adds: 'If your hand happens to slip when carrying these blocks of jaggery, the jaggery comes right down on your feet, crushing them. The plastic sheets that the traders now use make things even more difficult.'

'The traders have started a new trend of packing the jaggery in polythene sheets,' Gyanba explains. 'The polythene is slippery and hence difficult to grip. There is always the fear that one of the blocks

may slip. This increases the workload. It takes as much time and effort now to make a single trip with these blocks as it took for two trips earlier with jaggery not wrapped in polythene,' Gyanba tells me.

'Since when have you been working as a coolie in the jaggery trade?' I ask Gyanba.

'I began as a child. In the beginning, I could not lift even a single block of jaggery. But the other coolies helped me out. They would give me the broken pieces to carry. They would not give me blocks to carry to the upper storey. They were proud that such a small child was attempting to do the work of a man and would give me lighter work. Ever since then I have been working in this trade. Now my joints have begun to ache.'

An old man with a turban is pulling a handcart along the road. Gyanba calls out to him, '*Pehalwan!*' It was droll to hear that emaciated and tired looking old man addressed as a 'wrestler'. 'This is Theurkar,' says Gyanba. 'He had a fantastic physique when he was young. He was an expert wrestler. After working as a coolie in the jaggery trade, this is what he has been reduced to.' He tells the old man: 'Take off your shirt and let this gentleman see for himself.'

Squinting up at me, the 'wrestler' quietly unbuttons his half-sleeved shirt and stands before me wearing only his *dhoti*. His chest sticks out; his buttocks appear to have sunk in. 'When you work in this trade,' Gyanba relates, 'your back becomes crooked. Look at his knees.'

His knees seem larger than a pair of coconuts; his feet are also splayed. 'He cannot sit straight. Sit down and show us,' one of the coolies tells him.

The 'wrestler' bends forward first and rests his hands on the ground; then, with a laboured expression, he drags his outstretched legs across the floor and then manages to squat on the ground. One can see the pain reflected in his face as he does this. The simple act of sitting down has taken him all of two minutes.

Meanwhile Gyanba has called another coolie forward, 'Look,' he says, 'working as a coolie in the jaggery trade for so many years has destroyed his hands.'

Gyanba turns to the 'wrestler' and exclaims: 'A wrestler when he came here – and look at what 15 years of this work has done to him! He cannot cope with work as a coolie in the jaggery trade any more; even on this handcart he carries only lighter items like dry chillies and puffed rice.'

'What will you do when you can no longer manage even this work?' I ask the 'wrestler'. He shrugs.

Another coolie speaks up, 'What do you mean, "What will you do?" He will lounge around and beg, what else?'

I indicate that it is time for me to leave. The 'wrestler' folds his hands in a *namaskar*; so do all the young, healthy coolies. One day all of them, I think to myself, will be in the same state as the 'wrestler'. And they are well aware of it!

I leave the jaggery market.



I go to Devichand Utramchand Sancheti's shop where I am supposed to meet Bhanudas Bahirat. When he comes up to me, I find that he is a man in his early forties, with swollen, blood-shot eyes. He leads me directly through a narrow alley to a godown in which dried chillies are stored. I notice that the godown faces an old house, with clothes-lines strung across the galleries. Before us is a large metal door, which is shut. When we are still some distance away, two coolies come out. Seeing us, they stand aside. The pungent, burning fumes from the chillies hit us. I am overtaken by a bout of coughing. A woman calls out from inside the old house opposite, 'Close that door, we are coughing ourselves to death.' We hurry into the godown, and the coolies close the door behind us.

Many coolies are at work in the godown. The dust from the chillies is all-pervasive; everybody there is coughing incessantly.

The godown is quite large. The roof is made of metal. The godown is unlit; I cannot see a single window. Whatever little light and wind gets in makes its way through gaps in the haphazardly laid metal sheets that constitute the roof.

Some coolies have pieces of cloth covering their mouths, others do not. Like Bahirat, everyone has bloodshot eyes. Some are working in the midst of mounds of dry chillies, others are busy spreading them on the floor. A few are sprinkling water on the chillies.

'How do you work in the midst of this burning dust every day?' I ask Bahirat.

'I have been working here for the last twenty-five years. This cough will be with me till I die,' Bahirat replies.

A coolie standing nearby breaks in, 'This cough is so horrible that it makes you retch all the time. As a result, you can never eat. You eat very small quantities when you can; if you eat more, it all comes out.'

I ask some coolies to open their mouths and look down their throats. The backs of their throats are covered with angry red spots, the marks left by the incessant coughing.

In the meantime, my eyes have begun to burn. 'What effect does the chilli dust have on the eyes?' I ask.

'After a year or two in this trade you can't even thread a needle,' a coolie informs me.

'It's particularly bad in summer,' Bahirat adds. With the tin roof overhead, and the heap of chillies below, you burn. It takes us hours to get to sleep each night. We nod off around dawn. The body burns – whether we bathe when we get home or do anything else, the burning doesn't stop.'

Another coolie lifts up his foot and shows me the sole. 'The chilli powder lodges in the cracks of our soles; it makes us feel as if our feet are on fire.'

'Why don't you use some footwear?'

'How can you work with slippers on your feet?' he replies. 'You don't get a good grip – your feet keep slipping. We can't even cover our mouths with a piece of cloth – it is terribly suffocating. Novices to the work do it, but it is quite ineffectual.'

'Why do you sprinkle water on the chillies?'

'To give them a sheen – besides, water increases the weight and the traders benefit.'

'What are those people doing there?' I ask, pointing to a group of coolies who are engaged in vigorously stirring the chillies.

'Let me show you,' says Bahirat. We walk there. 'Chillies come in three or four grades. The traders benefit by mixing them. We call it "mulching". When you want to "mulch", you place them in layers and mix them.'

The coolies are 'mulching' a large, waist-high, mound of chillies. They stand there, bending forward with their heads practically touching the chillies and fling the chillies behind them through their legs. This ensures better mixing. Though we are standing some distance away, we begin to suffer but these men are working right in the middle of the chilli heaps.

'Right now, the dust is relatively bearable. But during the "season" a lot of soil comes in along with the chillies. That burns more than the chillies themselves,' says Bahirat.

'You have been working in this gruelling business for the last 25 years – why don't you leave and work in the grain trade instead?' I ask.

'I did work in the fertiliser trade for some time, and also in the grain trade. When our master changes his trade, we too have to follow suit. Now our master is well established in the chilli trade, and that's how I am here,' Bahirat informs me.

'That means that you have stayed with the same master throughout. Why is that?'

'One gets used to things – it is better to stay. And elsewhere there are bound to be other difficulties. If you are a coolie, there is no escape from hard labour,' Bahirat tells me.

I am about to leave, but various questions continue to haunt me. If the coolies' bodies burn so much, how do their wives cope? But I find myself unable to frame the delicate question. Finally, I

broach the issue to one of the coolies: 'You work with these chillies. How do your wives like this?'

The coolie doesn't know what to say. An elderly coolie tells him, 'He wants to know whether our wives are willing to sleep with us. Tell him frankly what the situation is.'

The coolie flushes, 'Of course they suffer, how couldn't they? But to whom can they complain? Yes, the wife of one of the coolies deserted him on account of this. She said she would rather be a whore than sleep with such a beast! She went and lived in a slum in Pimpri. A few of us went there to persuade her to return. We told her, "Is it any fault of ours? This is the nature of the work." But she would not budge. This kind of thing has happened to a few men here. Their home life has been ruined.'

I take leave of Bahirat and his companions.

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A little past the coolies' Social Centre, a number of men are sitting by the side of the road, stitching gunny bags. Others are busy loading bundles of rolled-up gunny bags into a truck parked nearby. These coolies work in the jute trade.

I approach one of the raised stone platforms where torn gunny bags are being stitched with pack-needles. Across the road a few women sit, keeping an eye on a bunch of dark, emaciated infants playing on tattered sheets spread on the ground. The older children play nearby. There are also a few men, squatting by the side of the road. Streams of dirty water flow past them. The stink of rotting wastes emanates from a garbage bin. Some men sit unperturbed near the bin, stitching gunny bags.

A young man, around twenty-five years old, is sitting on the platform. Sambhaji Bapu Aarne is his name. I begin to ask him about his work. Tucking his pack-needle behind his ear, he is ready to talk to me.

'How many years have you been doing this work?'

'Since childhood. I didn't have a father. My mother did this work. As a child, I helped my mother thread the pack-needle with

the jute thread. As I grew older, I started folding up the gunny bags, then dusting them. Now I am part of this trade.'

'What are the problems you face?'

'Dust is the real problem. We get many different varieties of gunny-bags – those that have been used for cement, for lime, for bone powder, urea, chillies. First, these bags have to be thoroughly dusted. The dust makes you cough. The cement and lime dust as well as the fine jute fibres from the gunny-bags enter our nostrils – many of us have contracted tuberculosis as a result.'

'But why do you work in the midst of all this filth? Why doesn't your master provide a shed for you to work in?'

'It is not the master's need. It is our need. That is why we work here. But this is nothing much – in some cases, we sit beside the public latrines and do the stitching. We work the whole day out in the open, under the scorching sun. When it rains and we run to take shelter, the owners drive us away. Everyone chases us away just as they would stray dogs. Our working day stretches from eight in the morning to ten at night. It is back-breaking work, and yet we never hear a single word of appreciation.'



I walk further down the same road and meet Kondiba Tatyaba Ware, in his late fifties, a capable, senior coolie. He tells me, 'You must visit the place where we work. Then I need say nothing more.'

I accompany him to a godown made of tin sheets. It is pitch dark inside. The floor is potholed and covered in a thick layer of dust.

As my eyes adjust to the dim light of the place, I see a number of grain bags stacked in a corner. The floor nearby is full of burrows, with dug-up earth piled near the entrances. Bandicoots are running around freely. 'There are snakes here as well,' Kondiba tells me. The floor is littered with dirty, rotten grain. The dim light from the doorway falling upon the grain reveals innumerable insects wriggling in the grain. A coolie standing nearby observes, 'Look, the grain you eat is stored in such filth.'

'Why is the floor like this?' I ask.

'Our master is just not bothered about the conditions here. With heavy loads on our backs, we have to tread carefully. A single false step and not only is your ankle sprained, the falling load could cause further injury.'

'But how can you see in this dark?'

'During the day, if the door is kept open, we are able to see well. You can imagine what happens when we have to work at night, sometimes till ten o'clock. We buy candles with our own money. I am scared of snakes, but what is to be done, it's all in the hands of God!'

Kondiba adds, 'The floor is uneven; one can't even stack the grain properly on such a floor. Often, the piles just collapse. Once the stacks collapsed when the women here were having their lunch. Fortunately, the bags fell in such a way that they were trapped in the gaps between them, so they weren't badly hurt. For a long time though, nobody realised that one more woman was trapped inside; we couldn't even hear her. When the other women realised that she was missing, we frantically moved the bags aside. And there she lay, unconscious, surrounded by the grain bags.'

I notice a coolie wearing a jacket made of sacking. 'Where do you get such jackets?' I ask him.

'You can get them made. For fifteen rupees.'

'How long does it last?'

'A few months.'

'Does your master pay for them?'

'No, no, why would he?' he replies in some confusion. 'We have to pay for these things ourselves.'

'Nowadays there is less work. You should come during the season,' Kondiba informs me. 'At that time, the dust in the air is so thick you cannot see a man if he is standing in front of you. The dust affects our lungs and causes respiratory disease. We had an asthmatic coolie here. He just couldn't cope with the dust. We tried to shift him around, gave him light work to do, but there is

no place in this market that is bereft of dust. The poor fellow had to leave and go back to his village.'

'The one quintal sacks of grain that we have to carry cause the spine to bend. You won't even be able to imagine the severe ache in our joints,' a coolie says.

Yes, I really wouldn't be able to imagine the pain, I think to myself. An occasional ritual of two hours of *shramdaan* and I am totally exhausted. Here people carry heavy loads all their lives; in fact, the larger portion of their lives is spent in this way.

'Lifting these heavy loads, coughing in the dust, one of us contracted a hernia,' another coolie tells me.

An older coolie breaks in, 'How much can you tell the *sahib*! Once a man is caught in the grinding stone, he is bound to get crushed! What is the use of going on about it! I have spent my lifetime in this trade and at the age of fifty-five, I am in a position where I am unable to send even twenty-five rupees to my home every month. It's a futile existence!'



Kondiba Vare tells me the story of a Kondiba Ghagre, a coolie who died recently. He was a senior coolie, honest, hard-working and experienced. As he grew old, he developed arthritis. He then started pulling a handcart for a living. When he couldn't do even that, he gave up and sat at home. His children treated him callously. When he went out of town to visit his son, another son drove him out. Finally, he could not bear the humiliation. All his life he had avoided every vice, but now he began to drink. This further ruined his health. He died recently. When he died, there was no money for the final rites. His body lay unattended for about eight hours. When the other coolies heard of this, they got together, made contributions and performed his final rites.

As I walk away from the grain market, I am benumbed. My life just can't be compared with that of a coolie, I think to myself.



There is a goods yard near the Pune railway station – two large sheds within a compound surrounded by high walls. The goods train unload its consignments here. The casual passerby along the road has no conception of the plight of the several hundred coolies that toil day and night in these two sheds. An outside observer would see only lorries and bullock-carts entering and leaving through the yard's enormous gates.

When you enter the yard through these huge gates, you are confronted by the sight of a large grey shed, with walls made of corrugated iron sheets. Within is a narrow, three-feet high railway platform. Twice a day, at six in the morning and at one-thirty in the afternoon, the coolies first unload the wagons and then carry the goods through the pulley-operated iron gate to stack in the warehouse. Outside, trucks maintain vigil to transport the goods to consignees. The coolies load the goods into these trucks as well.

I venture onto the platform. It is barely three feet wide. Sacks of cement are lying all around. There is a thick layer of cement dust on the floor; the coolies working there are covered with it. At the moment, a railway wagon is being emptied. The coolies scurry around to unload the cement bags from the wagon, then run along the narrow platform with them into the shed where they stack the bags in piles.

I meet Bapurao Udage, a man in his late forties. Udage sports a luxuriant moustache. He takes me inside the railway wagon to show me how they work. I have seen goods trains pass by on many occasions, but never thought of going inside one of them. From the inside, the wagon appears quite large. Cement sacks are piled up in a corner. The air is full of cement dust; quite dense. To enable me to see properly, the coolies open the door on the other side of the wagon as well. Now I can see them working inside the wagon more clearly. Like the 'jaggery' coolies, these coolies too have pieces of jute wound round their heads with strips of cloth. The cement dust has settled on their limbs, bodies, hair, beards, eyebrows – even on their eyelashes; only their blood-shot eyes are free of cement. The dust makes them cough. They repeatedly go to the side of the wagon, clear their throats with a grating sound and spit.

'Anybody who does this work suffers from this cough. The cement dust lodges in the throat and forms flakes. You have to keep spitting them out. You can see the white flakes in the phlegm, if you look closely,' Udage points out.

I notice suddenly that it is terribly hot inside the wagon and that I am drenched in sweat. Sweat keeps pouring out of the coolies working there; it appears to be absorbed by the cement dust which covers them like a thin film..

'Working in this heat must be torture.'

'The perspiration drives us crazy. It gets into the cement dust on our bodies, which then hardens. The continuous friction created when we carry the cement bags then rips the skin off,' a coolie tells me.

In the meantime, a number of coolies have gathered outside the wagon, curious to know what is going on. They look more impoverished than the coolies working in the grain trade: unshaven, long unkempt hair, sallow skin and ragged clothes. The expressions on their faces indicate amazement at the quite unprecedented event of some stranger gathering information about their lives. Once this fact has properly registered, each begins to exhort me to come and see their working conditions: 'Come to see the situation in the lime department,' 'No, no, let us take him to see the tile section first.' Udage intervenes and leads me into the next wagon.

This one is filled with sacks of lime. The situation is a little different from the wagon with the cement – the colour of the dust is now white. The coolies working there tell me, 'The lime literally burns up our bodies. We are worse off than the coolies in the cement trade. We are in bad shape when our sweat mixes with the lime. The soles of our feet get burned. On the days that a lime wagon arrives here, we are unable to eat properly or even sleep. Our bodies are like lava. We think, "Let us run away," but where are we to go?'

'Come to the fertiliser part, that's even worse,' one of the coolies says.

As we approach the fertiliser wagon, we are assailed by a strong chemical odour, so we remain outside the wagon.

The coolie at whose suggestion we have come here says, 'This is filthy work. Sometimes, there is bonemeal fertiliser, sometimes, fishmeal fertiliser; but it is the "Saalpeet" that is really terrible.'

'Saalpeet?'

'Sulphate,' clarifies Udage.

'Urea and "saalpeet" powder spills inside the wagons. It spills on the platform. And we have to walk over it everywhere. When it comes into contact with water, it is unbearable. It literally burns holes through the soles of our feet,' the coolie continues.

He lifts his bare foot and shows me the sole. It is covered with ulcers.

The coolies lead me into the shed.

There are all kinds of goods inside – piles of sacks, rolls of newsprint. Seeing us, the coolies engaged in stacking the sacks stop their activity. Immediately a man standing near the truck, clad in a shirt, pyjama and cap yells at them, 'What are you standing around for, get back to work!'

The coolies accompanying me grumble in protest, 'Can't you see that our *sahib* has come?'

The man does not relent. 'Stop gaping, get back to work!'

'All these middlemen are like this, always in a hurry, they don't allow us any respite, even for a few seconds,' a coolie tells me.

'Who are these middlemen? What do they do here?'

'They are agents. When the consignments are due to arrive, the traders hand over the receipts to these agents. They come here with the necessary papers and take delivery of the consignment. In return, they receive a commission from the traders,' Udage informs me.

'But why do they rush you so much?' I am curious to know.

'We have to unload the wagons and transfer the goods from the platform to the shed within a fixed interval. If this is not ac-

complished, the railways charge demurrage. The middlemen naturally want to avoid these costs.'

Another coolie objects, 'But they never pay the demurrage themselves anyway. If demurrage is charged, it is deducted from our wages.'

As we are talking, the coolies working in the adjacent shed hear the commotion and come over to see what is going on. A spirited coolie from the group takes me to the other side of the railway tracks.

There I see more coolies, sitting in the open. 'Right now, some of the sections don't have much work, that is why the men are sitting around,' the young coolie tells me.

I see a group of women seated to one side. They work with coal. Apparently, they spend most of the monsoon months without any work to do.

I notice an elderly bearded coolie with a turban. He has a dirty, blackened bandage on his leg. I ask him what happened. He tells me, 'A flooring-tile fell on my foot. I got off lightly – only a toe was broken. I could have broken my leg.'

'Is there a first-aid facility here?' I ask.

'Here? In this yard?' he asks in astonishment. 'There isn't even any provision for drinking water, leave alone first aid. I went to Sassoon Hospital and stood in a long queue. I lost a day's wages, but at least got my wound dressed. They asked me to come again after two days, but then the flooring-tile wagon arrived. I could not afford to miss the opportunity – as it is, work is scarce.'

The flooring-tiles are stacked in piles in the open. They are of varying thickness, ranging from 1 to 4 inches. The coolies are removing them from an half-open wagon and arranging them according to their thickness.

The young coolie, pointing at the wagons, tells me, 'We call them boxes. Look, there is a small window at the bottom of every wagon. It is not possible for us to unload the large tiles from such a small opening. The tiles have to be lifted and handed down from a

height of five feet. Just imagine the additional effort this involves! Now the tiles here are small, but sometimes, they are the length of a man. If you drop one while either lifting it or handing it down from the wagon or when carrying it, your feet are as good as gone. The wound caused by a tile crashing is very bad – particularly if it slices through the foot. If you escape that, the front portion of the foot becomes black and diseased and has to be amputated.

'In case of such accidents, when someone loses his foot, how much compensation do you receive?'

'Compensation! No way! Don't even mention that word in this yard. We are an unfortunate lot, abandoned by all. If one of us loses his leg, the middleman isn't bothered. We have to pay for the tile though, in case it is broken.'

'Have a look at the palms of coolies working with flooring-tiles,' Udagé urges and shows me the palms of the young coolie. They are badly calloused. 'Don't just look at them, touch them,' Udagé suggests.

I take the coolie's hand in mine, and check his fingers. There is no flesh on them and they are hard – it feels as if I am holding a piece of wood.

'Aren't they like wood?' Udagé asks, using the very analogy that has struck me as well.

The feel of the coolie's palms leaves a deep scar on my mind. We take pleasure in running our hands caressingly over the soft petals of a flower, the tender cheeks of a baby or the lips of a woman. With palms like this, the young coolie is incapable forever of experiencing such tender sensations.

In the meantime, another wagon has arrived at the shed and we make our way there. The coolies open the door. It contains wooden planks, packed so tight that there isn't an inch of extra space.

'You can't even enter this wagon; how will you remove the planks?' I ask.



A coolie working there tells me, 'We will try to gently move the planks near the top of the open door. Once one of them has been loosened, we will remove it. We will go on doing this, till a small gap is created. Then one of us will squeeze through the gap and loosen some more planks. This is the way we have to work.'

'It must take a long time.'

'It takes an hour or two to just make the initial gap. And then comes the rest of the work.'

'But why do they pack the wagon so tight? Can't they leave some space for you to enter and move around?'

'The loading at the other end is done by the railway employees. Why would they be bothered about us?'

The young coolie speaks up again, 'The railway staff and the middlemen know that this work takes a long time. Despite this, the railways charge demurrage and the middlemen deduct it from our wages.'

'Our hands, feet and back get badly scratched when loosening the planks and squeezing through the gap. But we have to hurry on

account of the demurrage, and ignore any wounds or scratches we may receive,' another coolie standing there adds.

I move on.

Massive iron girders are lying on the ground. Iron rods, fifty to sixty feet long, are also heaped up there. First, these rods are twisted into a loop to facilitate transportation, and then loaded onto trucks. When the rods arrive, they are straight. They are then bent into loops – only thus can they be loaded onto trucks.

Two coolies are gripping each end of a long rod. There is a large stone placed in its centre. Using this as a fulcrum, they bring the ends towards each other and thus make a loop in the rod. They are holding the end of the rod to their chests, moving towards each other, placing each foot firmly on the ground. They remind me of a pair of bullocks, going round in circles, turning a sugarcane press. Their muscles are swollen with the effort, sweat drips profusely down their faces, as is the case with bullocks when a thick wad of sugarcane has been put in the press.

The young coolie tells me, 'This work is very dangerous. If the bar slips out of your grasp when you are bending it, it hits you straight in the chest. You get thrown backwards; you could also break a rib or two. The wounds can also be quite nasty.'

We return to the first shed. There, coolies are busy stacking cement bags by tossing them in piles onto one another. Thick clouds of cement dust rise up all around, getting into the food of the coolies eating nearby.

'Why are these coolies sitting here? The cement is getting into their food,' I ask.

'That can't be helped, we all eat our food around here. There is no other place,' Udage tells me.

'Why haven't the Railway authorities provided a place to eat and rest? So many of you work here.'

'All these years, there was no space for us. After we complained and fought repeatedly, they gave us a dingy room – next to a stinking gutter. That place is so filthy, we don't even feel like going there, leave alone sit and eat. So we continue to eat here.'

'Forget about a decent place to eat, even drinking water is not available here, despite the work being so strenuous,' a coolie complains angrily.

Since I had heard of the water problem earlier, I ask, 'What do you mean when you say there is no provision for water?'

'You won't find even a single tap here. But we need the water, so each shift contributes Rs.3.50 and we hire a few women to fetch water. They manage to get water from somewhere or the other,' the coolie replied.

Another added, 'When they go to the nearby railway workshop to fetch water, the workers there stop them. If they go to the railway station, the stationmaster stops them. Finally, they have to go to the hospital for it.'

It is depressing to hear that the women have to go around like this just to get some water. At a site where seven to eight hundred coolies work like animals throughout the day, there isn't a single water tap? Will it cost the railways the earth? A number of factories have come up around Pune. Their owners spend fabulous sums to rent accommodation for their managerial staff. They give them excellent perks including cars (and the petrol to run them), an excellent free lunch every day, and expense accounts which they can splurge on wining and dining in luxury hotels. But forget these factories, even the Indian railways itself expends large sums every year when it provides for first-class tickets for its officers and their families to travel anywhere in India. And the very same organisation cannot provide a half-inch long water tap for its own sweating and panting coolies?

'How about a toilet?' I ask.

Everyone laughs. The question is obviously pointless. 'Is the situation so hopeless?' I ask Udage.

'We don't work here under one master. The land belongs to the railways. The middleman employs us, the goods themselves belong to the trader. The situation is tailor-made for passing the buck: when we ask for something, they point to each other. The railway officials say that once the goods are delivered to the person

producing the railway receipt, their responsibility in the matter is over. The middleman says that he is merely an agent. "I get the work done by you and pay your wages, but this land doesn't belong to me. How can I provide these facilities," he says. The trader says that he has nothing to do with us: at the end of it all we are like homeless beasts!' Udage insists.

The young coolie breaks in: 'Forget about the facilities, we will be happy to get decent wages from the middlemen, but even this doesn't happen. Everyone takes his cut from our wages. The traders hand over our wages separately to the middlemen, who keep a portion back for themselves. These middlemen in turn hand over our wages to the truck drivers, who extract their cut before they pay the coolies loading the trucks. This is the situation. Here, no one is accountable to anyone else. Even if you die, nobody is bothered. Do you know the acid wagon episode that occurred about three years ago?' the young coolie asked me.

'No, I don't.'

'Hear about it from Nivrutti Kamble himself,' he said and called out to Nivrutti, a fair-complexioned, bearded man aged about thirty-five. Nivrutti relates the story:

'It was about three years ago. A wagon containing bottles of acid arrived here. The consignment belonged to one of the factories in the Pimpri Industrial Estate. As usual, the clerks of the middleman were in a hurry to get the goods unloaded. We opened the door to go inside; two of us in front, and two behind. As soon as the door opened, acid fumes poured out. The two coolies in front collapsed instantly: one died on the spot, the other on the way to the hospital. The two of us who were at the back also fainted. We were saved as we had collapsed before entering the wagon. Later we learnt that the acid jars inside had broken, and that the toxic fumes had remained trapped inside the wagon. The families of the dead coolies received no compensation whatsoever.'

The young coolie added: 'It was a terrible accident, but no one came here to enquire what had actually happened. There was a mere three-line news item about the accident in one of the newspapers. Around the same time, a female intern died when some-

thing happened in the Tarachand Hospital laboratory. That news got prominence, long reports on the incident were published day after day. Our news merited just three lines!'

'We do not expect to be treated like educated people. But tell me, who will look after the widows of the coolies who died? We collected some money and gave it to the widows. Every Divali now, we buy them some clothes as *bhaubeej*, but how much can we do? We have our own families to look after,' says Udage.

I am not given to sentimentality, but that day, as I bid these coolies farewell, my eyes are wet. I regarded myself – the class of society I belonged to – with loathing. How callous and ungrateful I have become, even my charity is sterile ...

These coolies who strain every muscle by their constant labour, are paid the lowest of wages, live in filthy slums, lead the lives of animals – are still able to come to the aid of the widow of a coolie who died at work. They collect money and they give her *bhaubeej*!

Who is the human being? And who is the beast?



Coolies looked upon the grain godown at Shivajinagar as a kind of heaven for work. 'A godown coolie leads a trouble-free life,' was a common refrain among the coolies in the grain market and the railway dumping yard. Whenever I met a coolie working in these godowns, the difference between him and other coolies was immediately evident.

One morning in the Shivajinagar grain godown:

I enter through the gate. The yard is a sea of mud, but the regular flow of trucks continues. There are about twenty large brick buildings within the compound – all of them godowns in which the Government stores its grain. Trucks carrying the subsidised grain meant for ration shops, arrive here and unload their contents. I step inside the huge door of the well-built godown. Its floor is tiled. Ventilators are fitted at the bottom as well as at the top, allowing both light and air to enter. Bulbs are also provided. Palaskar, a man with a fair complexion and prominent nose and

who is his forties, accompanies me. 'These ventilators are too small,' he says. 'We are demanding that they be made a little larger.'

I recall my visit to Kondiba Ware's godown. When compared to that, I cannot but agree with the coolies' perception that this is heaven indeed.

The sacks of grain inside the godown are neatly stacked. The godown itself is very large and there is a fair amount of space between every two piles of sacks. All this makes it easy for the coolies to move about.

The stacks themselves are arranged in piles of three different heights. The smallest, consisting of seven bags, is about ten feet high. The medium-sized piles, consisting of about sixteen bags, are around twenty feet high. The tallest stacks consist of about 21 bags and reach around 35 feet. The sacks are arranged neatly – the whole arrangement, in fact, is pleasing to the eye.

When we enter, the coolies are arranging a series of the smallest stacks. First, they place a long wooden plank with its bottom leaning on the topmost sack. Wooden strips have been nailed across this plank, creating a crude sort of ladder. The coolies use the contraption to carry the sacks to higher rows. The plank quivers as the coolies walk up and down – I am worried one of them may fall. The coolies, however, walk with a confidence born of long habit. Beyond the seven-bag stacks, I see that they have constructed another makeshift staircase using grain sacks. They use these 'stairs' to create the tall 21-bag stacks.

'The rates for the 7-bag, 16-bag, and 21-bag stacks are separate,' Palaskar informs me.

'Don't accidents occur when arranging the stacks?' I enquire.

'Yes. Sometimes, a stack collapses if it is not properly arranged,' he replies. 'The sacks at the bottom sometimes burst – maybe because rats have nibbled at them or because the cloth is poor quality. The stack sinks at this point. When arranging the stacks, you notice the effect on the upper layers. Occasionally, a coolie sprains his ankle and falls.'

'Who pays the coolies' wages? The Government?'

'No, the Government awards a work contract to the Coolies' Society. The wages are disbursed by the Society. This was not so earlier. Private contractors used to get the work contract. Not only did they pay us less, the contractors changed from year to year and there was no guarantee of regular employment. A new contractor would employ his own men and casually sack any of the old coolies if he wished. Now the system has changed and the contract goes to our Society. This has not only ensured regular employment; we get much higher wages than earlier.'

Some more coolies have gathered around. One of them says, 'Let's go to the godown over there, *mundafod* is going on there. Why not show that to our guest?'

'What is this *mundafod* business?' I ask.

'The grain sacks which reach the godown are of varying weights. The process by which the weight of each sack is adjusted to exactly 100 kgs before stacking is called *mundafod*.'

We walk over to the other godown.

There is a great bustle of coolies. A huge weighing balance supported by three wooden beams has been installed. Sacks of grain are kept against the beams as supports to prevent them from slipping. The weighing scale rattles as it works. While some coolies pour out grain from the sacks, others – with pack-needles and jute thread – are busy stitching them up again. Initially, it is difficult to figure out exactly what is going on, but after some time the whole process becomes clear.

A coolie squats atop a stack of grain sacks. One by one, he passes the bags down, where they are caught by two other coolies standing on the ground. A fourth coolie, wielding a long knife with a wooden handle, makes three deft slashes directed at the sack's top seam, while another pulls out the now loosened jute string holding it together. A woman standing in the midst of a mound of grain picks some up in a pan and sends it expertly into the open bag. Immediately, another two coolies grab the sack by its open end and hurl it onto the flat pan of the weigh-balance. A

hundred kilo weight rests in the other pan. An experienced coolie standing near the balance now rapidly tosses out grain from the bag. As soon as the pointer on the scale moves upwards, two coolies remove the sack and lug it aside. Even before the empty pan can rise up again, a fresh sack is already on the pan.

The sack that has been removed from the balance is shaken vigorously into shape by a coolie, after which another coolie, standing nearby with a pack-needle and jute thread, rapidly stitches it up. Yet another lifts it and carries it to the stack of sacks some distance away. Here, another coolie using two long hooks adroitly adjusts it here and there and ensures that it fits perfectly into the existing stack.

The whole operation proceeds like a well-oiled machine. Everyone there is totally engrossed in it; no one has time to even look at us. The coolie with the long knife is busy cutting open the bags, the woman is absorbed in throwing the grain into the sacks. As soon as one sack is removed from the weighing balance, a fresh sack replaces it. The coolie at the balance stylishly tosses the surplus grain out of the sacks ...

'Does each coolie have a fixed task, or do they rotate the tasks among themselves?' I ask Palaskar.

'Except for the coolie who weighs the bags and for the one who arranges the stack, the other jobs are interchangeable,' he replies.

In another godown, I find grain being sifted. It is then packed and stored once again. A large sieve has been placed at an angle and the grain is poured on it, raising clouds of dust. 'The powder they add to the grain rises up during sifting and it chokes us,' a coolie tells me.

'Sometimes, there is a particular type of fungal growth in the grain which gets into our eyes. This causes boils to erupt on the insides of our eyelashes,' Palaskar adds.

While walking through the godowns, I come upon a canteen run on a no-profit-no-loss basis by the coolies' society. Palaskar offers me a cup of coffee made with pure milk. There is a room

behind the canteen that is used by the coolies as a kind of common-room. Adjoining this room is the society office. A few *dhol*s (large musical drums) stand in a corner, some looking brand new. There is also a *taal* (a pair of small cymbals), carefully hung up on a peg and a harmonium that can be seen in the cupboard.

I am amazed. 'We coolies have a *bhajan mandali* here,' Palaskar tells me. 'We gather here in the evenings, after work, sing a few *bhajans*, and then go home. The group also visits the homes of colleagues when there is a special occasion like a *Satyanarayan puja* or the naming-ceremony of a child,' Palaskar tells me.

In the office, on the other side of the room, I see a 'Facit' calculating machine. A well-dressed coolie is busy with some calculations.

All this information surprises me no end.

The coolies are chatting among themselves. I overhear one ask, 'Where is that man?' 'He has gone to Bangladesh,' is the answer. 'Who has gone to Bangladesh?' I ask in surprise. Everyone laughs. 'There is a lone godown across the road, some distance away from all the other godowns. We call it "Bangladesh".'

'Now even the issuing clerk calls that godown "Bangladesh",' another coolie adds. Again there is loud laughter.

During my entire project of gathering information about the lives of coolies, this is the first time I have heard such hearty laughter!

There are about four thousand coolies working in Pune. Five hundred of them have been freed from the clutches of the middlemen, since the coolies' society took over the work contracts. And what a transformation in their lives! The amount of work remains the same, the hazards have not diminished. But the coolies have started getting decent wages and have developed a sense of pride in their work. They have stopped feeling powerless. Here, they are their own masters. Immediately, the work they do has begun to appear meaningful. A *bhajan mandali* has been set up, the society has its own calculating machine. There is scope for humanity, for the development of culture.

There must be thousands of *bhajan mandalis* in the city of Pune, and hundreds of Facit calculating machines. They are hardly worthy of notice. But against the background of the life of the three thousand coolies working at the grain market and loading yard, the sight of these simple objects gladdens the heart.



The plight of these labourers was even worse before the formation of the *Hamal Panchayat*, a voluntary organisation of coolies.

Earlier, coolies did not have any fixed work schedule. They would sleep in the godown itself, and, after working throughout the day, would wake up in the middle of the night as well to unload outstation trucks. In addition to their routine work, they were required to do a variety of odd jobs – clean the shop premises of their employer, spread out the beds and mattresses, do their employers' household chores, clean up after their employers' children, drop the children off at school. Even their paid labour was more demanding than it is now. Employers could not bear to see a coolie sitting without any work – they would simply invent new jobs all the time. They would say, for example, that the goods needed to be shifted around. Shifting was sometimes dictated by a superstitious belief that if particular goods did not sell well, the location they occupied was jinxed.

The wages paid in those earlier days were very low. Coolies would get two or three rupees for a day's work – which could involve 24 hours of backbreaking toil. The traders would select a smart coolie from amongst the workers themselves and make him the supervisor. They would ensure his loyalty by giving him special concessions and benefits. Once the supervisor was fully under the traders' control, they could get away with paying low wages. The coolies were by and large illiterate; they quietly accepted whatever the supervisor paid them.

But now things had changed considerably for the better.

Today, no coolie is compelled to live in the godown. He works from eight in the morning till eight in the night. He may even work a couple of hours extra when there is a rush of work. A coolie

doesn't have to oblige his employer by carrying out the latter's household chores or clean up the shop. Besides, different rates for different kinds of work have been fixed. For example, a coolie will get different rates for unloading the goods from a truck; stacking them in the godown; weighing them; taking them to the first floor of a shop; arranging stacks of varying heights – 7, 16, or 21 sacks, etc. As traders now have to pay for shifting of wares from one place to another, they can no longer afford to indulge their superstitions. An employer cannot dismiss a coolie from work merely on a whim – he must give a satisfactory and convincing reason for wanting to get rid of him.

These changes are the result of a long and protracted struggle by the coolies. The *Hamal Panchayat* was established in 1955 or so. The coolies rallied under the banner of this organisation and their struggles were successful. It is not as if the educated and enlightened sections of society happily agreed to these improvements in their working conditions.

The story of the birth of the Panchayat is remarkable. A group of coolies was sitting outside a restaurant drinking tea. They saw the municipal corporation's sweeper-women decked up in new *sarees* and blouses. The women had received these clothes as a *Deepavali* bonus from the corporation, their employer. The coolies thought hard: 'If these women could form a union which could negotiate these benefits for them, why can't we men do something similar? We don't have any organisation of our own and our plight is pitiable.' At that very instant, the coolies decided to form their own union. The first meeting was organised in a nearby temple. Seeing that the coolies were interested in organising themselves, some local politicians also participated, only to withdraw from these efforts at a later stage. The coolies met the leaders of the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) in Congress Bhavan and were told: 'There is no law regulating your work, so how can a union be formed?'

In fact, sectors which are not protected by legislation need to be organised as a first priority. Once organised, agitations can be launched to press for suitable legislation. But who would be willing to accept this challenge?

Besides, the coolies were poor and illiterate; the employers were wealthy and had the politicians in their pockets, due to which the police were also unsympathetic. There was a fear that the organisation would break up due to the pressures exerted by these circumstances. The coolies finally approached Dr. Baba Adhav, a medical practitioner with a thriving medical practice, who was also in charge of the local branch of the Rashtra Seva Dal (a socio-cultural organisation of the Socialist Party). Dr. Adhav threw all his weight behind the *Hamal Panchayat*. In the space of twenty years, the *Panchayat* organised half a dozen major coolies' strikes in Pune. The movement also took recourse to a number of innovative methods of agitation. This, in brief, is the background of the *Hamal Panchayat* which became a powerful and effective organisation that succeeded in ameliorating the plight of the coolies to a considerable extent.

In the initial days of the organisation, the coolies were afraid of the traders' reactions. When *Panchayat* members came around to the shops to enrol coolies as members, the latter often hid behind the sacks. Today, as a result of the organisation, the coolies are much more self-assured.

The coolies were illiterate, there was no legislation regulating their work, so naturally, when a suitable leader emerged, the coolies flocked to the organisation. The traders spent money freely and even managed at first to get some members to defect from the *Panchayat*. A rival union was floated, but the coolies did not support it. Maharashtra politics saw a wave of Maratha caste-consciousness after 1957. The majority of coolies belonged to the Maratha caste, and attempts were also made to use this factor to woo them away from the *Panchayat*. But the coolies were not fooled. A Congress politician used the caste card to convince some Deshmukh-Maratha coolies to form a separate union in the Shivajinagar godown. But the support it received was so poor that it broke up. Eventually even the coolies who had left the *Panchayat* returned. The middlemen operating in the railway dumping yard paid the Shiv Sena (a lumpen political organisation) to float a rival union. As a show of strength, the Sena brought a truckload of

people to the dumping-yard, but their strong-arm tactics were used against them by the coolies and the women there and the initiative failed.

Right from the inception of the *Hamal Panchayat*, the coolies conducted themselves differently from the industrial workers in Pune. Industrial workers switch their allegiance to rival unions whenever it suits them, but this has never happened with the *Hamal Panchayat*. The industrial workers are usually concerned only with their own issues, but the history of the *Hamal Panchayat* has been different. The *Hamal Panchayat* took out demonstrations in solidarity with slum dwellers. It arranged food for the dam-displaced people that had organised a *dharna* outside the Collector's office and for those agitating for their land rights in Yavat and Urulikanchan as well. It also registered a strong protest when Guru Golwalkar (the erstwhile head of the RSS) defended the four *varna* caste system. A similar agitation was launched when Tanpure Maharaj performed a *yagna* in Pandharpur. Dr. Baba Adhav runs a novel anti-caste social awareness campaign called '*Ek Gav, Ek Panavatha*' which demands a common water source for each village, unlike the present where the water sources are reserved for different castes. The *Hamal Panchayat* bore the cost of Dr. Baba Adhav's travel expenses for this programme.

There are those who say that the coolies come out on the streets whenever Baba Adhav asks them to, often without even having understood the issues involved. Even if one accepts this viewpoint for the sake of argument, the fact remains that the coolies do participate in the demonstrations in large numbers. Even if their leaders ask them to do so, industrial workers do not participate in agitations when these are not directly related to their own interests.

The coolies have not accepted defeat just because there is no law governing their labour. They have set up a *Bhaubeej* fund to help the families of those who have died at work. If someone becomes disabled when working, an attempt is made to accommodate such handicapped coolies and to provide them with work.

Kamble, a coolie, began to suffer from severe coughing due to a build-up of pressure on his stomach from carrying heavy loads.

The condition later developed into hernia. The hernia was operated upon and he was forbidden to lift heavy weights again. But he was literate and could keep accounts, so the *Panchayat* gave him the job of a *Panchayat* supervisor in the Food Corporation of India godown. He gets a salary of 150 rupees per month. The *Panchayat* also employs widows of coolies and gives them odd jobs like fetching water or sweeping up fallen grain. Elderly coolies whose joints have become stiff are given easier jobs like weighing goods or arranging bags in godowns.

The coolies are prone to a variety of illnesses contracted at work. Unlike industrial workers, they are not covered by an 'Employees' Insurance Scheme'. The *Hamal Panchayat* floated a special health fund and opened a free dispensary for its members where they could get medicine on payment of just 50 paise. The dispensary also identifies coolies suffering from tuberculosis and treats them practically free of cost. Vaccination camps are organised for the children of coolies. Apart from the members, other poor people of the area also avail of the dispensary's services.

Coolies need to eat well, so they have two breakfasts in one restaurant or another. The common breakfast was called '*pav-sample*' – a small loaf of bread with extremely spicy vegetable curry. This curry irritated their insides. But now the *Hamal Panchayat* has launched a scheme called '*kashtachi bhakar*' (bread of labour) – two large jowar *bhakis* and a cup of excellent vegetable for just a rupee. *Shira* and *sabudana khichri* are also available for 50 paise. Thus, much better and more hygienic food is available here at the same price that the restaurants charge for the '*pav-sample*'. Around five thousand people in the area depend on this '*kashtachi bhakar*' (and other items available under the scheme) for their daily sustenance. Today, the annual turnover of the scheme is seventeen lakh rupees.

In short, the *Panchayat* has used every means to ameliorate the problems faced by the coolies. But the major issue of an appropriate legislation for coolies remains unresolved. These coolies work for a very large number of traders. The average trader employs a few – at most ten – coolies and hence he is not covered under the

provisions of the Factory Act or the Shops Act. Many coolies work at the dumping yard and yet they do not have one single employer. We have already touched on other obstacles, like the fact that the workplace belongs to the railways. To sum up, there is no legislation under which the work of coolies is covered.

The *Mathadi* Act, which covered coolies, was passed, but the Pune Chamber of Commerce went to court and obtained a stay. The case has been languishing in the Supreme Court for a long time, leaving matters as they were earlier.

Even if legislation provides the coolies with better wages or security of employment, their hazardous working conditions will not improve unless there is legislation to regulate the manner in which the traders maintain their godowns. Sad to state, the main issue has thus remained untouched.



Almost all the coolies have come to earn their livelihood in Pune from the surrounding rural areas – mainly from perennially drought-stricken places like Barshi, Osmanabad, Ahmednagar and barren areas like Maval. 'Back home, there were one or two acres of land and five or six brothers to share it; when it became difficult to manage, I came here,' is an oft-heard story. There are also many landless folk.

Numerous Dalits – economically destitute and sick of social exploitation – work at the dumping yard. The majority of coolies working in the grain market and government godowns belong to the Maratha caste. When a new migrant arrives in Pune, he first tries his luck at the railway-dumping yard. Once he gets used to the work there, he gradually ventures into other jobs. I made enquiries regarding the reason why the upper caste Marathas work in the grain trade and the Dalits at the dumping yard. I realised that this was because the grain market is a place where traders interact with their customers in person. Therefore, the traders will not allow Mahars and Mangs (two Dalit castes) to touch grain. At the dumping yard, however, there is a feeling of anonymity, and Dalits are acceptable.

A coolie, even years after coming to the city, continues to maintain unusually strong ties with his native village. He works in the city, but his mind dwells in his village. Many coolies leave their wives and children behind in the village. They visit their homes at the time of the village *zatra*. Coolies settled in Pune continue to perform family ceremonies and weddings in their villages. Members of their families arrange all the associated festivities in their village homes. If it is off-season and his employer allows him to do so, the coolie himself goes to attend them.

Coolies from roadside villages near Pune receive a tiffin-box daily from home, sent along with a passing truck. The tiffin-boxes contain food for the entire day. A coolie eats his lunch in the shop or godown of his employer, provided the employer is a decent individual. But there are nasty employers who refuse to allow the coolie to eat at the work place. In such cases, they go to a colleague's quarters and eat there. The rooms where they eat are called, '*panyala aadhar*' (meeting the basic need for drinking water).

Some coolies eat in private messes. Coolies who live in rented rooms and have their families with them, run small messes for four to six coolies in their homes. The charge for two meals a day is between 60 to 100 rupees per month. Each mess usually serves people from the same village or district, and always from the same caste. Some coolies eat in a particular mess because the woman running the mess is their '*gurubahin*'. (When a boy lacks a sister in the family, a ritual is performed by which another girl becomes his sister or his *gurubahin*.) Sometimes a group of coolies shares a common spiritual teacher or benefactor and therefore eat together. All the coolies, after they have eaten, sleep at night in godowns, shops or outside some house, or on the platform. Usually, they have fixed places where they sleep daily.

Sada Badade pulls a handcart. He sleeps out in the open. He uses a small bag as his pillow. After waking up in the morning, he hangs it on the handle of his handcart and moves around with it the whole day. The bag contains a change of clothes and a bedsheet. The bag is his entire household, his safe, his home ... everything in one small bag. After dinner in a mess, Sada lies down on the plat-

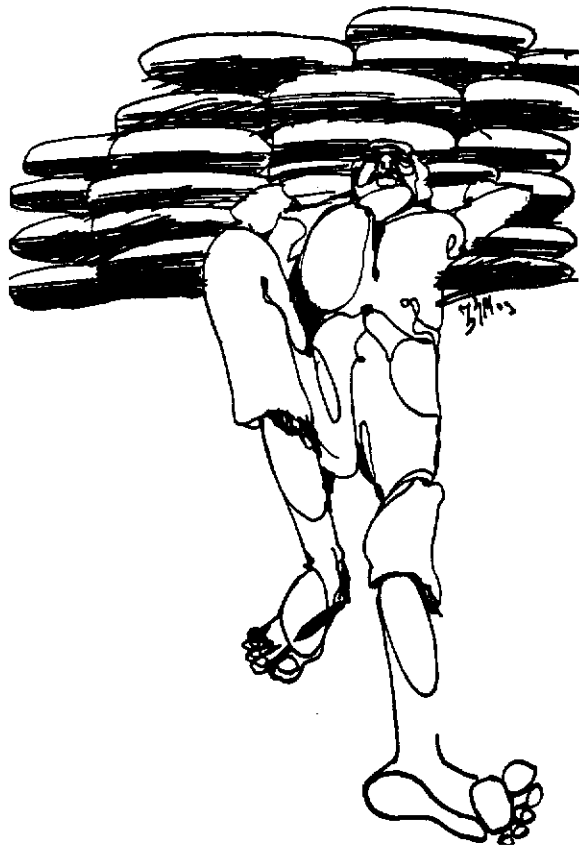
form outside a house, covers himself with his sheet and contemplates his life.

Coolies such as these bathe at a water tank meant to provide water for bullocks in the Nana Peth locality of Pune. They use public toilets. If their shop has a toilet and water tap, they use them.

Out of a total of 3500 coolies, 1500 live in slums. About seven to eight hundred eat in messes and sleep either in godowns or in the open. The remainder live in one-room houses. Even in the slums, coolies of the same caste, or from the same village, prefer to cluster together. Nearly all the coolies working in the dumping yard and some of those at the grain market live in slums. Their settlements are usually near their workplaces.

Some coolies live in decent rooms, some make do with lofts or the undersides of staircases for homes. Such tenants face severe harassment from their landlords. When a landlord plans to get rid of a coolie because he wants to get a deposit out of a new tenant, he will refuse to allow him to use the water tap. He will lock the toilet and abuse him.

Coolies who have their own rooms are considered fortunate. They have their families living with them. Some even have their own bullock-carts and a pair of bulls. These coolies have a certain prestige – the kind of prestige that attaches to those from among the middle-class who possess a bungalow and a car. I visited the house of one such coolie. It was in a block of dilapidated houses. There was no electricity. In the dark, women of the block were filling water at the tap in the compound below. A bull lay ruminating before a bundle of hay. I had to climb a narrow and dingy staircase of rotten wood. I looked at the room in the weak light of an old kerosene lamp. One wall of the room had collapsed, and a bamboo mat covered the side. A woman sitting near the *chulha* was making *bhakris*. A few children were asleep, huddled together under a sheet made of old recycled clothes. The coolie, who had just returned from work, lay spread out on his back on an old gunny bag, head under his hands, eyes wide open.



Often, coolies who have no male offspring from their first wife go in for a second marriage. After having seen a number of coolies with two or three wives, one starts wondering whether the law against polygamy is applicable to them at all. Such coolies are officially separated from their wives as per custom, but the first wife continues to live with them. She does not find anything strange in the fact that her place has been usurped by another woman – she feels that her husband has done the right thing to have a male child.

Coolies usually have many children – six or seven is fairly common. A life of poverty, and so many children besides – the women are completely worn out as a result. Groups of coolies' children

can be seen playing on the roads of Nana Peth and Bhavani Peth, amidst the busy traffic. The mothers do not seem overly concerned about their safety. In this dingy, polluted atmosphere, the children are prone to respiratory diseases. Children contract pneumonia and even when the doctor asks that they be taken to the hospital, this is not done, as the coolie would lose a day's wages in the process. Later they very matter-of-factly tell the doctor, 'The child you saw the other day is dead.'

Ignorance and apathy are immediately obvious characteristics of coolie families. Despite frequent illnesses, medicine is never brought on time. In spite of rampant disease, the children of coolies do not receive prompt medical treatment. When the doctor diagnoses a child as suffering from typhoid or jaundice, the parents stop medication and rush to a *mantrik*.

Traditional holy men have considerable sway in coolie localities. These *devrishi*s claim to cure every ailment, from the common cold to cancer. The coolies borrow money on interest to perform the sacrifices recommended by these characters.

Just next to Nana Peth is the renowned *dargah* of 'Mira Datar'. Coolies and their families are always to be seen there. There are five *aartis* a day. Each time about hundred to two hundred devotees participate. As soon as the drums calling the devotees to prayer begin to beat, the 'spirit' possesses the devotees and many of them start shouting, screaming, gesticulating, untying their hair, shaking their bodies violently – the dance of the 'spirit'. A bucket of water from the *dargah*'s tank is sanctified with a few petals from the top of the tomb following every prayer. The devotees drink the holy water.

One coolie living in the Guruwar Peth area of Pune is himself often 'possessed'. There are long lines of people wanting to ask him questions when he is in this state.

Most coolies and their families are uneducated. Out of 3800 households, just about half a dozen boys have passed the matriculation examination, some going on to become graduates. Most children are put to work at a young age. Baban Nimbalkar, a coolie, speaks about his childhood:

'As a child, I had a great desire to learn, but our circumstances did not permit it. In summer, I would have to sell watermelons to be able to buy clothes. When the monsoon came with its religious festivals, I would sell flowers and buy textbooks from the money I earned. I had to discontinue my education soon after my father died, when I was in the fifth standard. My brother and I started pulling a handcart. Two small children, pulling a handcart for a living – it must have been a moving sight and others would help out, especially on a slope. Later I became a coolie.'

Coolie households often lose the main bread-earner early – this I gathered through my interactions with them. The working conditions in the profession are definitely the cause. But there is another factor that shortens a coolie's life – alcoholism.

An office bearer of the *Hamal Panchayat* told me that about 80% of the coolies drink. Of this, 20% are totally addicted to liquor. When asked about this vice, some coolies said, 'After a day's work, the body aches so much we can't get sleep without drinking.'

A senior coolie broke in, 'That is not true. We have also worked without liquor. Does liquor stop the body aching? No. This is merely your self-indulgence.'

Whatever the reason behind drinking, liquor has ruined the already worn-out bodies of these labourers.

A coolie who earns seven rupees a day spends five on liquor. Only two rupees reach his home. The life of his family is ruined: the women are anaemic, the children have rickets, live short lives or pick up bad habits.

Though many coolies are *Varkaris* – part of a religious movement that frowns upon the consumption of alcohol – they continue to drink. At every meeting, Dr. Baba Adhav and other office-bearers of the *Hamal Panchayat* talk about the ill-effects of alcohol, but to no avail. A coolie mischievously told me,

'I drink toddy. In a meeting the other day, Dr. Baba Adhav exhorted us to stop drinking. I heaved a sigh of relief when the meeting ended. Baba denounced liquor but he did not say a word against toddy. I thought to myself, "So it is all right to drink toddy."

In sum, the dangerous working conditions, backbreaking work that wears out the body, drinking problems and alcoholism, the resultant financial and mental trauma to the family, social backwardness and the consequent dominance of superstition, ritual, holy men, holy places ... all these factors have ravaged the lives of coolies.



About 3800 coolies are members of the *Hamal Panchayat*. Apart from these, there are probably about 1500 more coolies in Pune. What status do these coolies have in this city?

Today, a large-scale migration is taking place from the rural areas to the nearby industrialised urban centres. The position of the young landless labourers or poverty-stricken small peasants is particularly desperate. First, they are illiterate, and are therefore unable to get any employment, even as ordinary workmen. They do not have even the small capital required to start some petty business. To succeed in a business, one has to be able to negotiate the minefield of urban life, and these people are totally unsuited to this. The only alternative that remains is physical labour. Since people are migrating on a large scale, the numbers of those wanting such physical labour is very high. The waiting list of the *Hamal Panchayat* has thousands of names on it. With such a rush of people even for a coolie's strenuous existence, the wages paid are naturally less than what they need. All one can say is that due to the efforts of the *Hamal Panchayat*, at least the wages have not declined further.

This is why the coolies that we have just met are considered lucky by millions of others. At least they have been fortunate enough to have been given the opportunity to have themselves ground to dust under the grindstone of this profession. It also explains why, despite all the problems they face at work, they stick on tenaciously to their jobs. Even a transition from one trade to another is unheard of. What the city has given them is this – work day after day for the rest of their lives in the same trade and in the same godown in which they began work as children.

The coolie may live in the city, but his mental frame remains that of a villager. This is because he is not given the opportunity to strike roots in civic life. A full day's backbreaking labour followed by sleep is what constitutes his entire life; he has no energy left for anything thereafter. Neither does he have any time or money. Some coolies do not have even a roof over their heads. Their private lives consist of an annual three-day visit to their villages. Due to their work, they cannot even live amidst their families. This circumstance begins the visits to prostitutes. The coolie is caught in a whirlpool of misery.

After having contracted a venereal disease, the coolie infects his wife, with the result that she suffers frequent miscarriages. All this ruins her health. And finally, she is tormented by her husband for being responsible for the lack of offspring. The coolie marries a second or third time in the hope of children. But the disease spreads and he still does not get any offspring – but the lives of two or three women are ruined in the process.

The coolies who live in slums have to cope with the problems there. At least the children of coolies whose families have been left behind in the village are safe from the harmful influences of the city. A girl coming of age in a slum soon takes to promiscuity under the lead of her friends and the petty heroes of the neighbourhood gangs. Boys, instead of improving themselves, take to crime under the influence of the movies. A coolie leaves his home early in the morning and comes back (usually drunk) late in the night, and has no clue as to what his children are up to.

The social landscape of those coolies who live in old houses, rented rooms or lofts, is rather different. The landlady repeatedly asserts her rights over the invaluable treasures of the property – the taps, the toilets and other amenities. She distributes these riches at will to those in her favour. The premises are thus the locus of endless bickering and quarrels between owner and tenant. The situation at home is not one in which the coolie – returning home exhausted – would feel at ease.

In short, some coolies exist merely to lift heavy loads, while otherfortunates have been granted entry to the lowest levels of

hell that this city has to offer. In those depths, a man's consciousness becomes progressively gross. Raw passion and low cunning become the centrepiece of his existence. The rural mind, weakened by superstitions and caste biases, is then combined with urban rootlessness and lawlessness into a potent mix. The victims are none other than his own wife and children.

One aspect of a coolie's life that struck me repeatedly was its total lack of creativity, its animal nature. Ox-like, the coolie is condemned to carry heavy loads all day. The pain of this animal existence can often be heard when a coolie speaks.

During one of my sessions with a group of coolies, one of them told me, 'The trader pays us a lumpsum every day for the day's work. We then have to split it among ourselves. The coolie who delivers the goods – he owns a bullock-cart. The bull is an equal partner at the time of the sharing-out of wages. The coolie who owns the bullock-cart gets two shares. One for himself and another for the bull.'

'A man and a bullock, they have equal shares?' I asked.

'Is there any difference between bullocks and us?' he countered.

A coolie's job is arduous, totally draining, and this aspect is bad enough. But ultimately it is the sheer monotony of the work that is more troublesome. Deprived of his creativity, he is deprived of his humanity as well. This animal existence destroys the coolie and endows him with a deep sense of alienation. To escape this feeling, he drowns himself in liquor, but that only compounds his problem.

The coolies' society won the contract for the work at the Shivajinagar godown. They started earning a little more money and working in better conditions. And with all this, the work also acquired a measure of human dignity. Though the work continued to be mechanical in nature, the feeling of alienation was reduced and the coolies could partake of some of the joys of creative work. The *Hamal Panchayat* also helped restore dignity to the coolies' lives. The *Panchayat* today symbolises the creative power of the

coolies. Through it, they have carved out a space for themselves in the civic life of Pune. Many of its office-bearers have given up alcohol, saved money, and educated their children.

But these are exceptions. The majority of the coolies continue to live the lives of beasts. They loathe their work. I asked many of them, 'Are you going to make your son a coolie?' 'I would rather die than allow my son to do this filthy work! I'd prefer if he became a thief instead,' they would retort sharply. When looking for a groom for their daughters, they avoid coolies as far as possible. 'This fellow's life is always at risk,' a coolie would think to himself. He would prefer to marry his daughter off to an agricultural labourer back in the village.

What could be more suffocating for human beings than being compelled to do what they hate? Added to this is the knowledge that all society wants from them is the labour their bodies can perform – bodies which this very labour wears out fast, weakens and finally renders useless.

It is difficult to live in such a situation, without the mind eventually dying.

It is relatively easy to point a finger at the vices of coolies; after all, the ills of those at the lower rungs of society are known to us, there is nothing private about them. The very nature of existence here breeds gross defects. But those responsible for this situation come from the upper strata of society, and none has the guts to point out their errors before the world. Besides, to do so would be pointless.

Traders and middlemen, whose enterprises are built upon the lives of coolies, have prospered. Ordinary traders have, during the past ten years or so, become owners of big four-storeyed buildings. Many of them have become multi-millionaires. Uttamchand Pokarna, the President of the Pune Merchants' Chamber, owns half a dozen buildings in the market area and about four cars. He also owns a farm in Aundh, exclusively devoted to the cultivation of roses, which regularly win prizes in the city's annual 'Rose-Show'. 'We have seen this man acquire his riches and construct a number of buildings in the city. But this same man cannot bear to increase

the wages of the coolies toiling in the basements even by a paisa. He forces us to go on strike and sucks our blood,' a senior coolie told me.

Whenever the coolies go on strike, the press invariably sides with the traders – after all, they advertise in their newspapers, and what bond could be stronger than that? So the sympathies of the press are spoken for. At other times, if a coolie dies at work, they may print a two-line news item. When a middle-class or upper-class person dies, there are regular reports, plenty of discussion and letters to the editor. The death of a coolie is not deserving of this treatment.

The average person is not even aware of the conditions in which coolies live and work. When brought to his notice, he reasons, 'The coolies have fallen upon bad days due to liquor.' This reasoning frees him from the prickings of conscience. He does not accept the basic fact that his own comfortable existence is based upon the labours of the coolies.

All politicians have a stock solution to every problem of the working-classes – increase in wages. It is beyond their understanding that while a wage rise is undoubtedly important, there are other human needs which must be provided for. The intellectuals and technocrats of our society do not bother to work on even the small changes that would contribute immensely towards making coolies' lives bearable. It would, for example, be a great convenience to the coolies working in the dumping yard if the railway authorities were to redesign the wagons carrying wooden planks or tiles, so that an entire side can be opened at the time of loading and unloading.

Even more than wages, the main issue before the coolies is the one of their abysmal working conditions. Setting minimum occupational health and safety standards and ensuring their strict implementation is essential. Any work-site failing to provide sufficient light, exhaust fans, proper flooring, drinking water and toilet facilities should be declared unfit, and work there brought to a halt.

Many coolies fall prey to respiratory diseases like tuberculosis due to the excessive dust at work-sites. The Preventive and Social Medicine Department of Sassoon Hospital could be entrusted the job of measuring the level of suspended particulate matter; and in case this is over the permissible limits, strict punishments must be imposed – as are imposed in cases of adulteration of goods. Where dust is unavoidable, traders must be compelled to provide masks to coolies. Gumboots should be provided to those working with dry chillies and fertiliser. Also, godowns storing these two items should be shifted away from the main city. There should be a law prohibiting a coolie from carrying more than one block of jaggery at a time, but the wage must be maintained at the same level that he gets now for the three blocks he carries per trip. Those who sell rotten jaggery to distillers and bootleggers should be brought to book. Our technocrats should devote their efforts towards finding solutions to those problems which today appear intractable. In short, all sections of society must accept their duty to resolve the problems of the coolies.

And most importantly, all these improvements should be brought about without letting inflation take over. Else, the trader community would claim credit for improvements made at the consumer's expense!

A lot of pressure in this matter could be exerted on the traders and middlemen if society as a whole were to rally around the coolies. The next generation of coolies will not be so embittered. If this does not happen, the coolies will continue to toil in the dingy basements and godowns of the city market. And the rose gardens of the Pokarnas will bloom in their full glory.

Homes and Settlements



The Pune of the Peshwas is now a thing of the past. The noblemen's mansions with their distinctive patterned windows are being razed to dust and standardised four-storeyed concrete structures are coming up in their stead. The traditional old city is now ringed around on all sides by industries. The roads, once the promenade of horses and elephants, are now host to swarms of bicycles, handcarts, and – belching clouds of smoke – cars, scooters, buses, and auto-rickshaws.

The life of Pune's citizens has undergone serious change over the years. Just a generation ago, Pune was the somnolent refuge of pensioners. They were a familiar sight, to be found in groups, wrapped in woollens, with their carved walking sticks and their little jokes, on their way to Parvati Hill for their morning walk. During the days of the British, the city was renowned for its excellent climate and layout. But today, the same city is full of slums and encircled by slums. At every step, one comes across an overflowing garbage bin, spreading the horrible stench of its rotting contents into the atmosphere. The streets around the slums are always adorned with patterns of human excreta and urine.

This transformation of the city has taken place over the past twenty years. Once further industrial expansion in Mumbai became impossible, Pune was developed as an industrial city. Thereafter, thousands of impoverished people from the surrounding regions began to make their way to the city. Some were unemployed landless labourers, others were small peasants from drought-hit areas whose small landholdings could no longer feed them and their families. There were village craftsmen rendered redundant by industrialization, and finally, the *dalits* who were sick and tired of the oppression they continued to face from the upper castes. Waves of such people kept breaking up on the shores of this city.

After the great flood of 1961, there was a big spurt in construction activity and construction workers were in demand. From 1968 onwards, the districts of Osmanabad, Beed, and Solapur went through regular spells of drought. After the great famine of 1972, wave after wave of drought-stricken folk from all over Maharashtra descended on the city to live in its slums.

Today, a veritable ocean of slums has sprung up all over the city and its outskirts. Pune is no longer the exclusive preserve of the middle-classes and the student community that it once used to be. Today almost three lakh poor people find shelter in the city's squalid slums. The middle and upper classes have virtually closed their mental doors to these slum-dwellers. 'These people are not poor, they are well-off. They have radio-sets at home and wear polyester clothes. They have their own liquor distillation units. They are filthy by nature. Give them decent houses to live in and they will rent them out and return to their squalid slums.' With these commonplace rationalisations, the well-off draw fences around themselves, justify their own comfortable circumstances and disown any responsibility towards slum-dwellers.

But this responsibility cannot be shrugged away that easily. Whether we want it or not, all of us, rich and poor, are part of a larger social and economic process. Out of this process, comfortable ways to live may have emerged for us and those of our ilk, but the very same social churning has dispossessed and impoverished thousands of others. These folk will continue to flock here in search of livelihood. They will do whatever they must in order to survive here. And it is their struggle for survival that will be the crucible of the new cultural values of the city.



Slums are synonymous with insecurity.

I had my first faint inkling of this reality when I visited a slum located on the slopes of a hillock in Parel village in Mumbai. A social activist led me up the hilly slope to reach that densely populated slum. We reached a hut and he opened the door. A massive boulder, around ten feet thick, greeted us. It was lying in the middle of the hut. The roof and rear wall of the hut had been ripped apart. The hillside on which the slum was set could be seen through the gap. A portion of a *saree* protruded from underneath the boulder. Children's toys were strewn all over the place; even cupboards and trunks had been smashed to pieces.

'The occupant of this hut works in a textile-mill,' related the activist. 'Yesterday, he finished his dinner and stretched out on the *charpai* near the door. The woman was eating her dinner. Their child lay playing on the ground nearby. Just then, a loud rumbling sound was heard from a distance. The family barely had time to look up before the boulder smashed into their hut. The woman, the child and a hen were killed on the spot. The man was injured and is lying in hospital.'

Seeing us, a group of people gathered around. One of them said, 'This calamity has occurred because of those damned rats. They dig their burrows in the rock, until the rock is hollow. This makes the boulders unstable. They are extremely dangerous during the monsoons.'

The activist drew my attention to some of the local men working as volunteers further up the hill. They were dislodging the rocks that were unstable and shoving them down into an uninhabited ravine at the back of the hill. Wooden planks had been strategically placed to prevent the boulders from entering the slum, or at least to slow them down. Those barriers appeared to be woefully inadequate against those massive boulders, but the effort had been made nonetheless.

Daily life continued all around us despite the underlying insecurity. A group of men that had gathered around us pleaded pathetically, 'We will manage to live here somehow or the other. Tell the government not to take a decision that this site is dangerous and shift us away!'

The first casualties of natural calamities are the slums; after all, they are located on sites abandoned by the well-to-do as uninhabitable. Numerous dense slums in Pune crowd the river banks or the banks of sewage drains like Nagzari and Manikodha. Recently, the heavy rains in the month of August caused heavy flooding. The rivers were in spate and their waters penetrated deep into the drains and *nullahs*. The settlements on the banks were washed away, much as they are shown to vanish in cartoon films, with a single stroke of a brush. The huts on the banks of the *nullahs* were waterlogged for two whole days. The slum-dwellers waded around in waist-high water,

trying to salvage whatever little they could from their homes. There were pathetic efforts to save stored food grains and wheat flour in the midst of the downpour. All the residents of the slums were temporarily shifted to the nearby municipal corporation school. With their bundles, their bicycles and *sarees*, they created shelters and set up makeshift hearths and households. They had plenty of financial worries: think about what they had lost; the cost of putting up new huts. But the main worry was whether they would be able to resettle in the same location. At times of such calamities, the good intentions of the government are a greater cause for worry for the slum-dwellers than the losses they suffer.

There are bungalows in the vicinity of these slums and the relationship of their occupants with the slum-dwellers is quite peculiar. 'These wealthy people are bent on getting rid of us.' 'They have powerful contacts.' 'At the slightest excuse, they phone the police.' 'They can uproot us any time' – these are the fears of the slum-dwellers. And whenever possible, the owners of bungalows have lived up to this reputation and uprooted many slums. The rich, standing at their windows with fancy curtains, do not want to look upon such an unpleasant sight; they want to be rid of the nuisance.

There was a big slum named Janata colony in front of the officers' colony of the Atomic Energy Centre at Trombay in Mumbai. It had about seventy-two thousand huts which had been shifted there by the Mumbai Municipal Corporation itself about twenty-five years ago. But the officers at Trombay hated the sight of a slum in their vicinity, and a variety of ingenious methods were tried to remove it. Finally, the slum was shifted to Chita Camp behind the hill. Today it has been moved away from there as well.



Just as slum-dwellers have cause to fear outside forces, there are some forces within the slum itself which threaten them. Slumlords – and their goons – who come to collect rent for the huts are virtual rulers of the settlement. It is fascinating to observe how various enterprising men have consolidated their positions as the

slums have expanded. At the time that slums began to crop up at the foot of Parvati hill, a man named Premchand Agrawal owned a cycle-repair shop there. After some time, he began to collect money from new arrivals to issue them 'permission' to set up their huts there. The local citizens had complained against the brick kilns operating in the neighbourhood; as a result they were shifted out of the city limits. But the huts belonging to the kiln workers remained in place. This was a new vista for Premchand to display his enterprise. Besides, some adjoining plots of land were privately owned. After 'negotiations' with the owners, he did some social work by shifting the huts elsewhere. He also floated an organisation to provide water and sanitation facilities to the residents of the slums, and issued several shares of hundred rupees each. Nothing happened thereafter. But the fact is that suddenly Premchand was able to lay his hands on a large sum of money. He used this to set himself up as a moneylender. He also started collecting funds to build an office for the slum. An office would be built along the main road. After some months, the office would be sold as a shop to a Marwari trader. The row of shops along the road started life as offices. None of the money has ever been accounted for.

Premchand did not set up his own gang. He would get a person drunk and incite him against another. His favourite trick was to file complaints against social activists who opposed him – 'This man came to my house and outraged the modesty of my wife.' After he filed many such complaints, the police got sick of the whole business. 'How is it that everybody is bent on molesting this particular woman,' they began to ask.

Within seven or eight years Premchand became the owner of two trucks, four tempos and a couple of shops. During the emergency, he was imprisoned under MISA (Maintenance of Internal Security Act). In prison, he contracted paralysis in both legs. Today, his empire is on the decline.

Premchand is an extreme example; but petty power-brokers like him rule the slums. They collect money from the residents on various pretexts and nobody dares raise a voice against them.

Slum-dwellers are under threat from several other forces: gangsters, stray cattle, the pigs who run around the slums eating human excreta and rolling in the gutters ... they all make life difficult. Most huts here do not have doors and usually a curtain made from gunny-bags has to suffice. This is hardly a deterrent to the pigs who charge into the huts on occasion and bury their filthy snouts in the food, rendering it unfit for consumption.



To add to the nuisance caused by men and animals is the revolting environment of the slums. Lakhs of people live in these settlements without latrines. It boggles the imagination to think of the quantities of filth created by these lakhs of human beings and the thousands of stray animals that loiter around the area.

Once one encounters the filth in a slum, one realises how grossly inadequate words like 'dirty' and 'squalid' are to describe the situation. In one slum, I saw an ancient latrine with a septic tank. This had become quite dilapidated over the years, and the cement slab covering the septic tank had broken. The filth from the tank was oozing out. A large pond of foul water, with pieces of human excreta floating in its midst, had formed. All around the slums were many huts, with their front doors overlooking the pond. Women sat at the front doors, busy knitting. Obviously, everybody had become inured to the filth.

The Nagzari *nullah* flows through the densely populated eastern side of Pune. It is a receptacle for the sewage of the entire city. As expected, there are not enough latrines, and thousands ease themselves by the bank of this *nullah*. Slums have come up on both sides of the Nagzari.

I had an occasion once to see a latrine in this slum. Not only was it overflowing with excreta, but the surrounding area for approximately fifty feet around was littered with it as well. A man who lived there told me, 'It is impossible to even reach the latrine – surrounded as it is with shit – let alone use it.' Another man told me, 'Earlier we would walk long distances to ease ourselves, and all the filth was in one corner of the slum, but now this affliction has

come to our doorstep.' 'Why don't you people keep the latrines in the slum clean?' I asked one of them. 'That requires water, *Saheb!* We have barely enough to quench our thirst,' he replied.

One can become inured to filth, but that does not diminish its power to cause disease. I asked a patient complaining of stomach pains in a clinic in one of the slums whether he suffered from worms. 'As far as I can remember, I have always had worms,' he replied. Worms are part of the daily stools. I have often seen emaciated children pass out hundreds of worms when given medication. Put your hand on the belly of a slum child and it feels as if one is grasping a bag full of worms. The parents slog day and night to feed the children. Most of the food ends up as nourishment for these parasites.

Most children suffer from scabies as well. Once one member of the household is affected, all the others contract it too. The huts are so small and cramped that it is impossible to avoid physical contact with one another. Under such circumstances, it does not take long for the disease to spread. Scabies is in any case a chronic disease, and it is provided a fertile breeding-ground in the slums. The women often don't even know that they should cut the nails of their children regularly. Children suffering from scabies scratch themselves frantically round the clock and the open sores fill up with pus.

Why do people live in such an insecure, dirty and diseased environment? The answer to this is very simple: because they have nowhere else to go. To die of starvation in the village or to live amidst this filth are the only choices before them. It is not that they are fond of living in squalor. But at least this hell offers them the option of survival.



People in drought-hit areas sell all their belongings before they leave their villages. They leave only when life becomes impossible there. Thus, when they reach Pune they barely have a sack of tattered clothes and a few tumblers with them. Their bodies too are emaciated due to the shortages of food in the drought. Besides, the

fact that they have had to leave their ancestral homes also makes them depressed.

They do not have any capital to start their own business. Neither do they possess any education or skills that will stand them in good stead in an urban environment. They are totally ignorant of the city. The majority of these migrants pick up tattered gunny bags and set out to collect scrap; all you require for this business is a pair of active legs.

Waste paper, iron nails, pieces of glass, milk bottle caps, polybags, pieces of plastic buckets, broken shoes and slippers, bones – anything and everything is collected by these people and sold to scrap dealers. These people know where to sell a particular item of scrap. They know exactly which shop will buy the discarded ash from a goldsmith's workshop, who will buy the used photographic lotion and where to sell the mud contaminated with chemicals that has been discarded by some factory.

Dustbins, bungalows (especially the area under the kitchen windows), and the neighbourhood of printing presses are rich sources of scrap. The real treasure trove of scrap, however, is the garbage depot outside the city limits. Scrap collectors dig up the ground here in search of scrap, creating burrows in the soil, like bandicoots. Some time ago the government relocated a slum on a plot of land that had earlier belonged to the Deonar garbage depot in Mumbai. The construction workers who were sent there to construct the tenements saw the brisk business being done by the scrap collectors who were digging up the ground work. They abandoned their work and began to collect scrap instead. Even the supervisors of those construction labourers entered the scrap trade. Collecting scrap can be an addiction of sorts.

Some people even take to petty thievery under the guise of collecting scrap. They pick up utensils or other items lying unattended near a window. As a result, even innocent scrap collectors sometimes get a thrashing. Some even enter into the restricted Air Force area in Lohagaon and collect fragments of recently exploded bombshells. The other day, an unexploded bomb went off in a scrap depot, causing a huge explosion.

Since it is rumoured that the scrap business gives you a decent income, many people, including the big slum sharks, are entering the trade. Fruit-sellers – who have a lean patch during the monsoons – go from one prosperous locality to another in search of scrap, buying it on the cheap. Due to all this, people are now storing the old discards that they earlier threw away for sale now as scrap. Naturally, this has adversely affected all those who make a living wandering around in search of such material.

Shops that buy scrap have come up all over the place. Bhavani Peth has many big scrap depots. They sell scrap as well as transport it in trucks to Mumbai.

Some smart operators first figure out the distinctive needs of the city and then set up their businesses. Vehicle repair workshops require large pieces of cloth to clean their machines and hands. One man supplies a bundle of such cloth to a garage once every eight days. He earns a rupee or two in this fashion. He collects these pieces of cloth from a variety of sources. Some are collected from *boharins*, women who repair old clothes and sell them in the secondhand market. It is customary to bathe dead bodies and dress them in new clothes before they are cremated. The scrap-collector gathers the clothes discarded at the cremation grounds in this fashion.

Paan shops in the city maintain a trash in a corner in which the shopkeeper throws pieces of litter like betel-leaf scraps, empty cigarette packets, used matchboxes, etc. One man does the round of *paan* shops every alternate day, takes this bucket aside and tips out its contents. He then picks up the discarded covers of cigarette packs and cuts them into narrow strips which he then ties up in small bundles. The bundles are handed over to the shopkeeper. These strips of discarded card are used by customers to light their cigarettes from the lamp kept at every *paan* shop. Our man cleans up the trash baskets, and in return gets the aluminum foil wrappers found inside empty cigarette packs. These pieces of foil are sold to snuff merchants who use them to wrap and sell snuff.

A friend of mine who lives in a slum is employed in a plastics factory. His brother buys plastic sheets cheap from the scrap col-

lectors, washes, dries and makes bundles of them, and sells them to the plastic factories. He buys polythene scraps – which have got mixed up with the usual bunches of old newspapers – from waste-paper dealers for a rupee and a half a kilo. He then sells these plastic sheets to the factories for around seventeen rupees per kilo. He has even employed a woman to wash and clean the plastic sheets for a daily wage of two rupees. He got this idea from his brother employed in the factory. An ordinary scrap collector recently arrived in the city would not even be able to formulate such a plan.

One can earn a little bit of money from collecting scrap, but that is hardly sufficient to manage life. So while the women and children of the household collect scrap, the male starts hunting for work as a labourer. Since such employment is not easy to come by, the menfolk drag their empty stomachs to the labour markets at Budhwar Peth or Swargate or elsewhere in the city. Like prostitutes waiting for customers, they hang around waiting for prospective employers. Labourers already working in the city try to help out newcomers with whom they are acquainted by obtaining employment for them in the places they themselves work. Coolies, construction labourers, roadworkers – in all these trades one can find scores of people who have obtained their employment through such acquaintances.

Those who have a little capital and are reasonably familiar with the city buy – or hire – a four-wheel handcart fitted with bicycle tyres. They load vegetables and fruits onto these carts and do the rounds of the city selling these groceries. They go to the vegetable markets well before the break of dawn and load their carts with fresh vegetables. They then either make their way to a fixed spot or do a regular predetermined round hawking these vegetables. Some hawkers buy whatever is available cheap and sell that, whereas others buy only certain items.

Every hawker is required to have a license issued by the municipal corporation. But the corporation issues very few licenses. Actually, the city has grown a lot and these hawkers meet a social need by supplying goods in far-flung areas of the city. But the anti-

encroachment squad, with its green vans, conducts regular raids and the unlicensed hawkers are picked up along with their carts and their goods, and dumped in the van, much like what is done with stray dogs. The corporation then fines the hawkers. All their capital has been invested in buying their merchandise and they don't even have the money to get their carts released from the custody of the corporation.

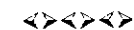
Consequently, while they transact business with their customers, they keep an eye out for the appearance of the green van. These hawkers sell highly perishable goods, and selling them before they spoil is one source of tension; added to that is the worry of getting caught by the squad.

Neither hawkers nor scrap collectors can afford to live too far from their workplace. A scrap collector survives on the objects discarded by the city, whereas a hawker cannot survive if there are no human settlements. Even a coolie who works from eight in the morning to ten at night cannot afford to waste his energy commuting. That is why all these people live around the main population centres of the city.

Trade and business is concentrated in the eastern part of Pune city, and whatever suffering this may entail, the poor prefer to live here. Along the banks of the Nagzari *nullah*, as it flows through this area, are densely populated Muslim settlements. Many of the people here buy bread and other bakery products from the nearby large Modern, Husieni, or Ariel bakeries early in the morning, strap the tins to their bicycles, and sell them all over the city. A large number of weavers also work in these areas, because there are large privately owned handloom workshops in the nearby Ganj Peth area. When the large reels of thread used by these weavers run out – what they refer to as 'broken thread' – they are without work for up to two weeks till new reels are ready. They cannot tide over such unavoidable breaks unless they have an additional source of livelihood. They then go to the nearby *bidi* factories, procure tobacco and leaves from there, and take to rolling *bidis*.

The scrap depots are in Bhavani Peth. Sikh ironsmiths living in this area purchase thick iron sheets from these depots and fabri-

cate frying pans out of them; they use the leftover scraps for making knives and brackets. These items are sold to villagers visiting the main market, which is also nearby.



Apart from these conventional occupations, the slums are also home to numerous activities that cause tremendous nuisance. An activist told me, 'These pigs are creating havoc in our slum. They barge into the huts and defile the food. The other day, a pig even bit a child. The child contracted tetanus and almost died.'

'Why don't you lodge a complaint with the corporation or load all these pigs into a truck and dump them outside the city?' I asked.

'The corporation once dumped them beyond Katraj village, but the owners brought them back again,' he replied.

Surprised that these pigs had any owners, I pursued the matter. The activist then explained the whole situation. 'Even though these pigs roam around like strays, they do have owners. Kaikadis and Sikh ironsmiths are the two communities that raise pigs. They don't need to spend any money on them; all they need to do is keep an eye on them. They mark the large sows and recognise them by these marks. A sow will not let piglets which are not her own approach her. Pigs survive on filth or the food they find in the huts. Once they are grown, the owners sell them to the butchers. A pig is worth about two hundred and fifty rupees – a white pig fetches three hundred rupees. Every evening, the Sikh ironsmiths buy rotten vegetables cheap from the market or pick up spoilt food from hotels for the animals. They have a peculiar way of calling their pigs, who come running from wherever they are once they hear the call. The pigs are housed in sheds built by their owners.'

Of late, some men have monopolized the pig trade. They keep pigs in many slums; they even hire others for a small sum of money to look after them. There is a Kaikadi leader who sends two truckloads of pigs to Mumbai every year and earns about fifty thousand rupees through this trade. 'But don't the pigs keep the slum clean by

eating the excreta?" I asked the activist who had given me all this information.

'That is a figment of your imagination! They may be eating human excreta, but what about their own. The stench of pig shit is awful, totally unbearable.'

Liquor stills do a brisk business in some of the slums. Vadars, Kanjarbhats and Lamanis run the distilleries. Other castes have a very negligible presence in this business. These three castes are all nomadic or semi-nomadic by habit; they are not concerned about matters of social prestige. Earlier, they used to camp outside the villages and distil liquor there.

I visited a liquor distillery run by a Kanjarbhat woman. She wore a traditional *ghagra* and *kurta* and was bedecked with ornaments. She told me, 'Our caste survives by begging. We used to earn a meagre living by singing songs. Now we have got into this trade. We are forced to do anything just to survive. My husband is in prison so I have to look after the business.'

'The police occasionally raid our distillery and ransack it. But they never touch the customers. They just whisk away the "punter".'

I did not know about these 'punters'. The woman enlightened me. Liquor distillers go out in search of paupers sleeping on the railway platform or try to catch hold of somebody recently released from jail. They bring him to the distillery and feed him well for two days. Then they ask him if he would work as a 'punter' for them. They pay him twenty-five rupees. His job is to surrender himself to the police whenever there is a raid on the liquor joint. Then he serves out whatever sentence is passed – he may be imprisoned for a few days, a month, or even two months; it all depends on his luck. From his point of view, this is just fine – after all, he has eaten well for some days. In prison, he doesn't have to worry about food. Besides, he has received twenty-five rupees. In this fashion, this sacrificial lamb is handed over to the police at the time of a raid.

I had a look at the liquor still. A tank had been built into the ground in a corner. It was full of a dark liquid kept for fermenta-

tion. I could see white froth floating on the surface. Beyond this stood the actual distillation unit, which consisted of two drums placed on their sides. A brisk fire blazed underneath. A couple of tubes protruded out of the drums. At the other end, freshly distilled liquor dripped into the container kept there. The woman told me, 'Once you put the ingredients in the drums, the first distillate is extremely heady. There is tremendous demand for this first distillate.'

As I left, I asked, 'Now the sugar factories have begun to manufacture *mosambi* and *narangi* (popular types of country liquor), hasn't this affected your business?'

'Not at all. Those who are addicted to this liquor will not accept any other. Such customers will always return.'

Many such distilleries have come up in the Wadarwadi locality of Pune. There are sheds for the customers to sit and drink. Slums are known for the paucity of water connections, but every distillery has its own connection. There are large cement drains at the rear. A large area has been provided to place the drums properly. Since the distillation units require firewood, many shops selling firewood have sprung up in the locality. Then there are the coolies who cart the wood on handcarts. The distilleries require spoilt black jaggery and *Navasagar* (a fermenting agent), which is provided by the Marwari traders. The customers who visit the liquor joints like to eat spicy snacks with their liquor; there are shops which provide these. A few eunuchs in the slum each keep half a dozen girls, who solicit the customers of the distilleries. In sum, the liquor distilleries are the epicentre of an entire industrial conglomerate.

An inferior type of locally distilled liquor is known as *Dalda* or *Khopdi*. This crude liquor is prepared by adding water to French polish and then stirring the mixture vigorously before it is strained through cotton gauze. This stuff is drunk mostly by low-class coolies and other menial workers. The liquor has many side-effects – if the proportions of the ingredients are wrong, it can even kill.

Due to all these activities, liquor has created havoc in the slums. The already impoverished slum-dwellers are pushed further along

the road to ruin due to this addiction. All those who run these businesses have rationalisations for their activities. But these self-justifications do not improve the lives of the poor.



City-dwellers believe that slum-dwellers set up settlements on any available vacant piece of land. This is not true. One can identify reasons why any slum comes into existence at that particular location. Mumbai, a city with an acute shortage of land, has most of its slums spread along the railway lines. This is because travelling by local trains is cheap, and one can travel to any part of the city for one's livelihood. In Mumbai's suburbs, there are many open spaces at some distance away from the railway station, but there are no slums there. The situation in Pune is different. Bus travel in this city is expensive and inconvenient (one cannot travel without a ticket). That is why people prefer to settle in places from where they can either walk or cycle to their workplaces. It is difficult to find open spaces in cities, and yet slums have come up everywhere.

The Master Plan for Pune city designates areas for schools, hospitals, gardens, etc. Reservation of such plots has been done according to American standards, without considering whether the municipal corporation has sufficient money to develop and maintain these public utilities. The corporation has no funds for these schemes, so it does not purchase the plots from their owners. The law prevents the owners from building on these plots or selling them to others. Slums come up on such plots of land. Similarly, plots of land caught up in litigation are uncared for. Settlements come up here as well. Government land is occupied as a matter of course. In the Yerawada area of Pune, extensive slums have come up on government land. In Ghorpade Peth, if you go down a narrow alley between two houses of buildings, you emerge into a small open plot of land right in the middle of this densely populated locality. About thirty huts have come up there. This is government land – it was confiscated in the course of bankruptcy proceedings. Once people came to know this fact, a settlement came up there.

Two large slums have come up along the canal that flows out of the Khadakwasla dam and which skirts the city. First, the land belongs to the Irrigation Department, giving the people a 'right' to it. Second, the canal provides water for washing and cleaning.

Whenever a large construction project drags on for several years, the labourers working there build huts in the surrounding area. After the completion of the project, since this place is situated near the city, they soon get absorbed in some other construction project. So the workers continue to live there and the slum expands rapidly. Between 1963 and 1968, a water purification tank was constructed at the foot of Parvati hill. This gave rise to extensive slums in the surrounding area. In the aftermath of the great Pune flood, a spate of construction activities began, resulting in a massive growth of slums.

There were a number of brick kilns at the foot of Parvati hill. The residents of the area complained against these kilns because they emitted a lot of smoke and polluted the whole locality. These kilns were then shifted far away to Vitthalwadi. On the now empty plots, there remained a few unoccupied huts built by the brick-kiln labourers. Gradually, these grew to five or six hundred! The Wadar stone breakers build their huts close to the stone quarries where they work. These huts remain even after the stone quarry gets exhausted; subsequently the huts multiply into a full-fledged slum.

No one likes to take the initiative to build huts on an open plot. But once a few huts come up, it does not take long for them to grow in number to a few thousand.

When hapless migrants first reach the city, they usually do not find a permanent home for a considerable period of time – they must first graduate through a few mandatory stages. As soon as they arrive, they camp in the grounds opposite the railway station or take shelter under a bridge. Only after that do they try to establish themselves in some settlement.

Two roads pass under the arches of the 'new' bridge in Pune: one leading to the railway station and the other coming from it.

The Pune Municipal Transport Corporation's bus terminus is close by. The buses pass under one arch and, having taken a U-turn, come back and pass under the other. Since the bus drivers have to take a U-turn in a very cramped area, they have to pass some distance from the central column before they can negotiate the turn; a small triangular patch thus remains unused on both sides of the column. The patch over which the buses ply has become dark and smooth from constant use, and the patch that is not used has remained rough and rocky. In that small patch, four or five families have built their huts. The residents of the huts conduct their daily affairs as though a wall separates the used part of the road from the unused part. One can see children playing, adults relaxing and smoking *bidis*, and scrap-collectors sifting thorough their booty. In makeshift *chulhas*, made of just three stones, dried Congress grass (*parthenium*) burns. The niches in the stone wall, originally made to support the scaffolding during the construction of the bridge, are now being used by the slum dwellers for the safekeeping of their personal belongings in small tin boxes: needle and thread, children's marbles, match boxes, etc.

As I stood there one day, watching the life of this settlement, a couple of the residents got into a quarrel. Soon enough, all the others pitched in. They rapidly came to blows. Workers from the bus depot nearby rushed up and intervened to stop the fight. Later, I learnt that the residents of this slum are mostly beggars. On a good day, they may get extra *chapatis* or *bhakris*. These are dried and stored for sale to a fellow beggar who has had a particularly unlucky day. In one such transaction, a man owed another five paise. The debtor refused to pay, hence the scuffle.



Those who live in slums are more 'respectable' than those living under bridges. The cheapest hut can be built in just ten or twelve rupees. In Bhavani Peth, a kit consisting of two curved bamboo poles and bamboo mats is available for the purpose. All one has to do is erect a frame with the two bamboos and then cover it with the mats. Later, one adds layers of whatever suitable material one can find: pieces of polythene, old torn raincoats, gunny bags, any-

thing will do. If one can find any gravel in the vicinity, it is dug up and spread on the ground inside the hut. Gunny bags serve as walls – if they cannot be found, brushwood or dry coconut fronds are used. A pit is dug nearby as a sink for washing utensils and clothes. When the pit overflows, the dirty water is simply scooped up with a tumbler and thrown further away.

One must bend over to enter such a hut. Usually, such a hut is no larger than five feet on each side. Two strong sticks support a gunny bag which hangs suspended by jute ropes from the roof. One can see a pair of tiny feet dangling out of this contraption – for that is the family's crib.

Huts made of '*reefaad*' are of better quality. When wood is sawn, the rough irregular sides of the log are discarded as they are of no use as planks – this is '*reefaad*'. They are sold in the timber market by weight. Huts made from tin sheets are even better. Small tin sheets made after straightening out tin cans are available cheap from scrap dealers. These sheets are joined to construct a hut. All these huts, whether made of tin or '*reefaad*' or bamboo, decay within a year or two and have to be constructed all over again.

The appearance of a slum depends upon the nature of the material available in the surrounding area. Slums emerging near brick-kilns are made of brick and mud, because broken bricks and half-baked bricks are available cheap. The huts of the *Wadar* construction workers are built of stones laid one on top of the other. The roof is a sheet of tin, held down by stones placed at the edges. The hut does not contain a single screw or beam.

Those who live here use whatever means they have to procure material to fortify and beautify their huts. Those living on the banks of canals have promptly prised out the tiles used to line the sides of the canals, and used them as flooring in their own huts. A wealthy man built a three-storeyed house in Yerawada, but as it was rumoured to be haunted, the owner could neither occupy it nor find a tenant. As soon as the slum-dwellers of the area got wind of this, they began to steal articles from the house. First, the doors and windows disappeared, followed by the tiles. Then the walls of the house were felled and the bricks were stolen. Only the frame

consisting of slabs and pillars remained. Finally, even that collapsed. Now there was nothing that was worth taking away from the rubble, so the mound is still there. The news of the house collapse appeared in a local newspaper under the caption 'Haunted Bungalow Collapses' – they were probably unaware of the nature of the 'ghosts' involved.

Even people in comfortable circumstances sometimes live in slums. Their huts differ from those of others. In the Hadapsar area of Pune, there is a settlement of farm labourers. As some factories have come up nearby, there are also some industrial workers living here. Since this area is outside the city limits, there is no dearth of land. The houses here are spacious, with courtyards and a *tulsi* plant in front of each house. There is also a small temple in the settlement with a small platform built around a banyan tree. The walls are made of clay bricks and the roofs are tiled. The settlement has the ambience of a village.

Ganeshnagar is a workers' colony in Yerawada. The well-built houses here have tin walls and tiled roofs. The industrial workers do not need to live in the middle of the city – they travel to their workplaces in factory buses. Due to this, these settlements are free of the customary problems of overcrowding and squalid living conditions. But such settlements are few in number.



It may appear that slum-dwellers are a motley lot, from different castes, from a variety of places and used to difficult conditions. This, however, is not the case – a slum is not a mere hotchpotch of heterogeneous people; there is a rationale underlying the pattern of settlement.

The resident of a slum invariably brings another immigrant from his own caste there, and asks him to build his hut in a vacant area near his own hut. If no such land is available, he makes place for him in a corner of his own hut, using a blanket or a bamboo mat as a partition. The early settlers often have a courtyard in front of their houses – space is available in the early life of a slum. Gradually, this space is occupied by the huts of people of the same

caste or from the same village. Thus, the dense clusters of huts, separated from each other by narrow, winding lanes, belong to people from the same village and the same caste, often related to each other. These clusters are actually miniature villages.

Lohia Nagar is a slum situated in the eastern part of Pune city, with a population of about 15,000 souls. The Telugu speaking Kongadis live in one corner of the slum. There are weavers and butchers among them as well. There are two sub-castes among the weavers: the Padmashalis and the Shakuns. They form different groups, but all of them live in the same area. Their houses are painted brick red. They have their own youth club, a devotional song club, and even a small temple of their goddess, with an idol brought all the way from Andhra Pradesh.

At the other end of the same slum is a large settlement of Muslims. Their houses can easily be distinguished – they are made of 'reefaad'. They are painted either white or green inside and out. They are also taller and more spacious than the other houses. The front doors are decorated with garlands made of colourful glass tubes. Many of them have sewing machines. The man of the house usually works as a rickshaw driver, mechanic or fitter. Some of their sub-castes make tasseled pompoms for sale. Muslims from Uttar Pradesh embroider *sarees* mounted on wooden frames – all the members of the family, including the children, are involved in the embroidery work. There is a mosque in the area and a *madrassa* imparting religious education to the Muslim children. The Muslims live in fear of communal riots, which is why they had congregated in a few slums in the eastern part of the city, where they live in tight groups.

In another part of the slum are the huts of the coolies, most of whom are from the Maratha caste. Their houses are made of brick and clay and the roofs are tiled. Some of these coolies own bullock-carts, which can be seen parked in the courtyards of these houses, with the bullocks in a small shelter alongside the wall. The scene here resembles a village. These coolies have their own social club: 'Chhatrapati Shivaji Mandal'.

In another section are six or seven huts belonging to Sikh ironsmiths. Usually there is some open space in front of their houses where they sit and do their work. Their huts are built in a distinct style, using mats made of sugarcane leaves. Usually, it is the nomadic tribes that build such huts – they are easy to dismantle when it is time to move. Though these Sikhs have been settled here many years, they continue to live in such huts.

The Matangs inhabit the remaining part of the slum. Their huts look impoverished and squalid. Many of them are addicted to liquor and make their living by gathering scrap. A few of them work as sweepers and sanitation workers.

In contrast, there is a slum situated on Jail Road called 'Nagpur Chawl' that is inhabited almost entirely by Buddhists. They too have been settled here for several years. Education levels are high, and many of the residents are white-collar employees. 'Does anybody in your family – the women maybe – collect scrap?' I ask some of them. 'Of course not,' they reply, 'that kind of work is done by the Matangs.'



The Bhangi caste, whom even the *Matangs* look down upon, live in a slum in the Harkanagar area of Bhavani Peth. Earlier, this area was at a considerable distance from the city. The Bhangis lived here in the middle of a wasteland of cacti. But the city has grown so much over the years that today this slum is in a thickly-populated section of the city.

In earlier times, when bucket latrines were commonplace, the Bhangis used to collect the nightsoil and transport it in two-wheeled carts for disposal. Then the sewage system was built. Today, in the sanitation department of the municipal corporation, all kinds of labour that involves contact with human wastes is still done by the Bhangis. Though most of the sweepers are Matangs, they only clear ordinary garbage. Of late there has been a tremendous growth of slums in the city and many slum-dwellers are forced to defecate on the roads. The Matang sweepers refuse to clean the nightsoil from the roads. This job is done exclusively by the Bhangis, who

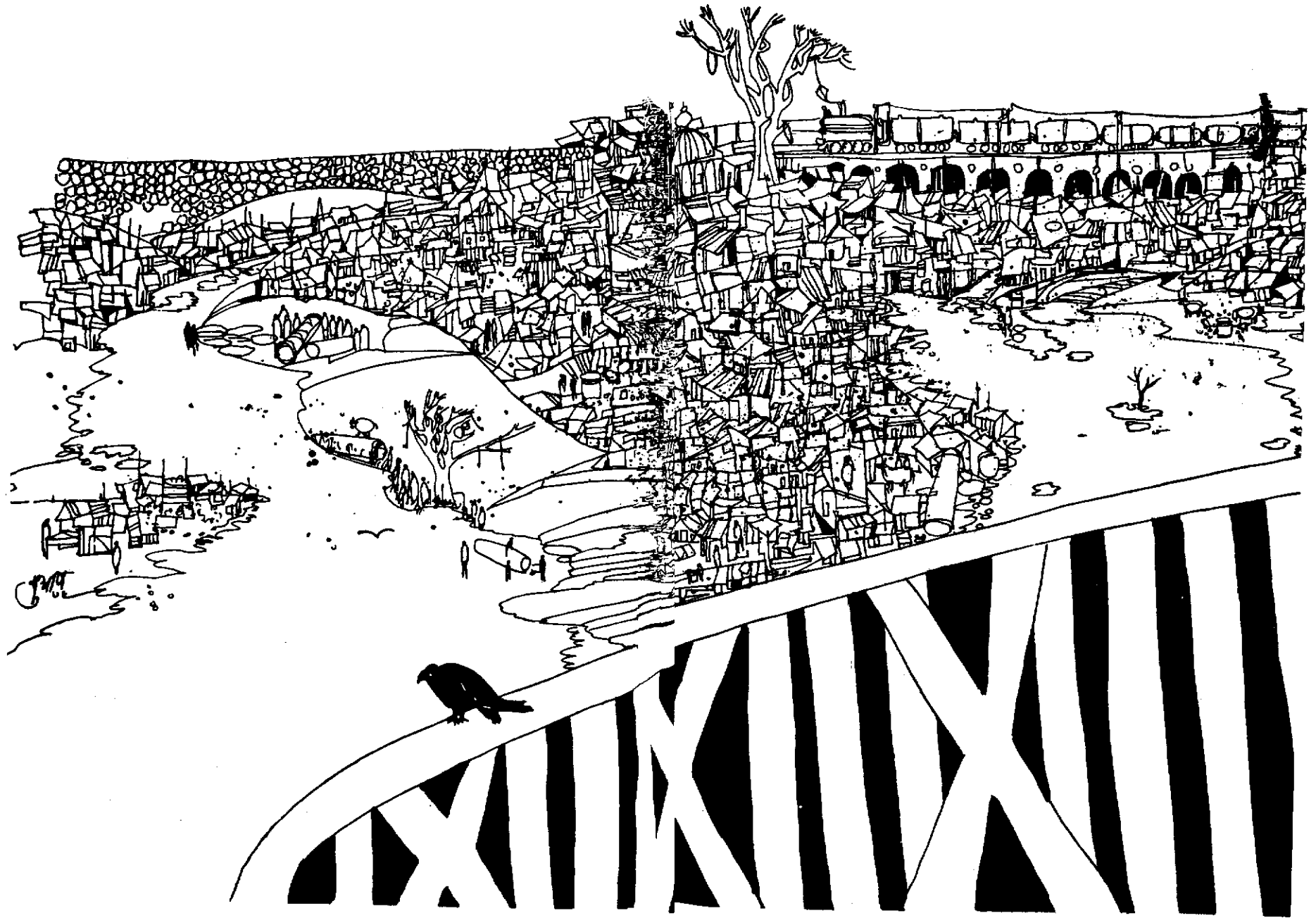


move around with a broom and a piece of tin, scraping up the faeces from the roads.

Though they work in the midst of nightsoil, their houses are sparklingly clean. Their kitchens are orderly, with the copper utensils scrubbed clean and stacked neatly.

Their houses are made of brick and mud and are painted white from the inside as well as the outside. One may also chance upon a *Peer* (holy man) in these houses. These people have peculiar names – a boy may have a Hindu name and the father a Muslim name. When asked about this custom, an elderly *Bhangi* told me:

'You upper-caste folk made us clean your nightsoil and then cast us out saying we are dirty. Even the Mangs do not enter our houses, but the Muslims accepted us. It was due to contact with them that we began to speak Hindi instead of Gujarati. That is also why we began to have faith in *Peers*. No one comes to help our women at the time of childbirth, but the Muslim midwives



come and perform their deliveries. Our custom is for the midwife to name the newborn child. That is why our names are such a mixture.'

The Bhangis have their own caste *Panchayat* which holds its monthly meetings at a nearby square. The *Panchayat* adjudicates disputes – people are willing to spend money to become members of the *Panchayat*.

Since the Bhangis have been living here for many years, their huts are quite spacious. Each hut has plenty of open space around it. But now that there is a scarcity of land, they have allowed others to build huts in these open areas, and charge 5 rupees monthly rent for the use of the land. Muslims and Matangs live in these new huts.



Of late, even the nomadic tribes which traditionally roam from village to village have begun to settle in the cities. It is no longer possible for them to make a living in the villages. Besides, the villagers harass them. Should a theft occur in the village when a nomadic tribe is camped on its outskirts, the villagers do not even bother to investigate before mercilessly beating up its inmates. The women folk are forever in danger of being molested. In the cities, on the other hand, not only can they make a decent living, there is more security.

Earlier, the Wadars used to engage in minor construction work in villages. They would quarry stones from the nearby hills and haul them to villages and farms in buffalo-driven carts. They were called Gadi Wadars. Now they live in cities, work at stone quarries and build their colonies near these quarries. Mati Wadars earlier specialised in laying the foundations of houses in the villages. The work on the underground sewage system in Pune began in 1910 and continued for many years. At this time, the Mati Wadars migrated to Pune and set up their camps beneath Fergusson hill, following their age-old custom of setting up their encampments at the bottom of hills. The Patharwat Wadars, who made grinding-stones and then marketed them from village to village on don-

keys, also migrated to the city. They began to supply stones to construction projects and set up slums to live in. They had always lived in huts, so this came naturally to them.

The Wadar's trade is extremely arduous and hence they do not have any competitors. If a Wadar makes ten rupees in a day, he spends four rupees on liquor, four on meat and the remainder on his other needs – they live by this crude arithmetic. They work for three or four days, and once they are paid for this work, they spend all their time in drinking, eating and revelry till the money is finished. They do not bother to go to work in this period. They return to work once the money is over. Some of them even take loans from Pathans. They pawn their hammers and chisels with Marwari moneylenders. When even that is used up, they go to the contractor, collect some advance payment to redeem their pawned implements, and then go back to work.

Their standard of living is abysmal and education is nonexistent. Many Mati Wadars have started liquor stills and made a lot of money, yet their living conditions have not changed. The wives of the still-owners are decked up with jewellery. They have a custom of buying gold and burying it. Some of the rich people have bought flats and built bungalows; but they have rented them out and have returned to their old settlements.

Another tribe that engages in hard labour like the Wadars are the Lamanis. Lamanis have come in large numbers to Pune over the past fifteen years. Their women wear clothes decorated with round pieces of mirrored glass. With chunky bone bangles on their arms and ornate brass hair-clips keeping their hair in place, Lamani women can be seen effortlessly carrying heavy pans at construction sites. The Lamanis are originally from Rajasthan; from there they migrated to Andhra Pradesh before arriving here. Earlier, they would shift their settlements from one construction site to another, but now they have established a few permanent settlements.

When one of these Lamani construction workers goes to Andhra Pradesh, he returns with ten others in tow. He finds them employment on a construction-site and collects a commission of 50 paise per day from each of them – from being a labourer, he has

now progressed to being a petty labour contractor, the *nayak* or chief of that group. The huts of the labourers are very simple circular structures, but the hut of the *nayak* at their centre is much taller and made of *reefaad*. The *nayak* settles all their internal disputes. His word is law and whatever fine the chief imposes is final. Any labourer who goes to the police is thrown out of his job. These *nayaks* have become quite affluent of late and roar about on motorcycles.

Despite having lived in the city for the past fifteen years, the Lamanis have hardly changed. They still weave their clothes by hand and celebrate festivals in the traditional manner. Though they may have some money, they do not renovate their poverty-stricken huts. They send the money back home – their ambition is to own some land back there, even if it be only a small plot. Some Lamani families have got into liquor-distillation. The liquor produced in the Lamani stills in Yerawada is sold all over Pune.



The Joshis are a community which, though small in numbers, is well established in Pune.

They have an old settlement in Ghorpade Peth as well as a new one opposite Hira Baug. The women who come to our doorsteps to exchange old garments for new utensils or glassware belong to this tribe. After this barter, they mend the old clothes and sell them in the second-hand clothes market. That is why every Joshi hut has a sewing machine. The menfolk of the community work at these machines. Some men also do whitewashing of houses.

A tribe similar to the Joshis is the Vaidus. Earlier, their trade was to barter needles and a kind of oil-nut called *bibba* for food. Being familiar with needlework, they took up the work of stitching quilts from old, worn-out garments. Today in Hadapsar, where these people live, the womenfolk stitch quilts and the men are to be found on the steps of large laundries darning torn clothes.

Earlier, Hadapsar was outside the city limits. Nomadic tribes would camp here at fixed times every year. Now, some of these tribes have settled here on a permanent basis. There are the Vaidus,

the Makadwalas – who train monkeys and stage roadside monkey shows – and the Bharadis, who raise buffaloes. The Bharadis buy young buffaloes and rear them till they become pregnant, at which time they sell them. The Bharadis are well-versed in buffalo-rearing. They even cover their animals with quilts to protect them from insect bites. They make mats out of the stalks of tender cobs and use them as walls for their huts. Since these cobs grow in marshy areas, they are not affected by damp weather and rain.

A wide variety of such tribes live in slums and earn their livelihood. They cling to their own castes and sub-castes for support. A slum may appear heterogenous, but each community has its own niche there, within which its social and cultural life is enacted.

But though they may be divided in this manner, there are certain common problems which affect them all. They all live in this cramped, impoverished and squalid environment, and this gives rise to a distinct, horrifying 'slum culture'. The new generations born in such conditions are shaped by this environment. This gives rise to many cultural problems.



The first generation of slum folk has had its consciousness shaped in the villages – their mind remains attached to this rural life. The fact that misfortune has forced them to leave their villages and migrate to the living hell of the city constantly nags at their minds. But the children who come with them and those who are born here grow up in this hell itself. To them, this is their normal environment, their natural milieu. Children who have been raised in huts standing alongside pools of human faeces become immune to filth. Childhood is the time for play, and it is in the midst of this filth that they play.

In the slums of Pune one finds four-feet long cement pipes placed upright for use as garbage cans. One such pipe lay on its side in one of the slums, with mounds of garbage scattered all around. A group of children were happily playing hide-and-seek amidst all this. They would go in at one end of the pipe and come out from the other. They were frolicking around as if in the midst

of lush greenery. Amidst the garbage lay a sow, with her piglets clustered around her. Once in a while, the children would tease the piglets.

What positive values could children living in this degraded environment hope to imbibe? The whole atmosphere is composed of this ensemble of dirty and gross objects, and the children grow up in its centre. The only pictures they see are the loud and extremely vulgar cinema hoardings; they never see any great sculptures. There isn't even a single tree anywhere around; beautiful flowers are unheard of. Their taste in music must evolve amidst loudspeakers blaring film songs. These are their influences at an age when their nascent personalities are developing.

At a time when parental bonds are crucial to their development, slum children are deprived of parental contact. During the days when I ran a charitable dispensary in a slum, an activist brought a dirty three year-old urchin, wearing nothing but a shirt, to me. 'This child has a perpetual nosebleed, give him some medicine!' the activist urged.

'Call his mother. Then I can get some information about this problem and also explain how the medication is to be administered,' I replied.

'His father was caught thieving and is in jail. His mother leaves to gather scrap at six in the morning and returns only at ten at night,' the activist told me.

'Then who looks after this child? Where does he live?'

'He just wanders around in the slum.'

As we were talking, the child kept looking at us plaintively. I felt a knot in my stomach as I thought of the future of this child.

A smart twelve-year-old boy would often come and help us in cleaning and sweeping the dispensary. He would take a piece of glass, blacken it and stare at the sun through it. 'In which class do you study?' I asked him.

'I don't go to school, I left in the fourth standard,' the boy replied.

'Why did you leave? Couldn't you cope?'

'No, no, I would stand first in the class, but my father sold all my books, so I left school.'

'Why did he sell your books?'

'There was no money to buy tea.'

'How much did he sell them for?'

'Four annas.'

'Will you go to school if we give you the books?'

'No, I have to cook for my father.'

'But where is your mother?'

'She lives in a hut opposite ours. She started an eating-house at home. There was a man who would come there for his meals. She left with him. Now I cook for my father.'

These children grow up in such adverse conditions – what is their future likely to be? This was an intelligent boy, but four annas changed his fate. Due to lack of education, he will be forced to become a labourer. This will not satisfy him because of his innate intelligence, but all avenues for advancement are closed to him. He will finally join one of the gangs in the slum – the gang will provide him with both status and meaning in his life. Criminal activities are the only recourse for such children.

Socially accepted notions of right and wrong, legitimate and illegitimate, are rendered meaningless in a slum. The instinct to survive becomes the foundation of morality. People acquire whatever is essential for survival by any means at hand. One night when there is no fuel for cooking, one can remove a plank from a house and bring it back home. There are many large trees on the outskirts of the city, which one can strip of their bark and branches. Some people even remove all the bark from the tree trunk, and the tree dies soon enough. And then there is a virtual feast of fuel.

I live on the outskirts of the city, near a slum. There are many massive banyan and pipal trees alongside the road. The bark of most of them has been stripped by the slum dwellers. In the pro-

cess, some of the tree trunks have become so narrow that these trees could fall any moment.

One afternoon I heard a loud sound and rushed out to see what the matter was. The huge tree in front of my house had fallen over. Within five minutes, the inhabitants of the nearby slum rushed up and attacked the tree like an army of ants.

Each group began to cut up a section of the tree using hacksaws and axes. All available implements were put to use and those families which had many young people available were hard at work. Single women, however, were making do with whatever twigs they could gather.

One of the men began to bundle up leaves as fodder for his cattle. Some had even brought their cattle and sheep to the tree itself to graze on its leaves. The *kulfi* seller, who was passing by, stopped and began to collect the leaves of the banyan tree to use as wrappers for the *kulfi*.

Within no time, most of the tree had disappeared. Groups of three or four men were jointly hauling branches home, while a few persons were using their bicycles for transport. One man even brought his bullock-cart along. Finally, all that remained was a five-feet high stump. At least this cannot be broken up, I thought. But some resourceful men used saws to cut it out of the ground. As I wondered how they would take the log to their homes, they began to roll it along the ground.

Within the space of an hour, the magnificent tree was gone. Finished. Over the next eight days, groups of women and children would come and use nails and stones to dig out parts of the roots. All that finally remained was a five-foot deep crater.

The road in front of my house, once lined with trees, has become totally denuded over the past two years.

These huge trees, with their shoots reaching down and merging into the main stem, strike me as splendid sculptures moulded by nature. My younger daughter sees them as friends, but to the slum-dwellers they are a mass of free kindling. Who is to say that one opinion is better than the other?

But trees are, after all, public property. Some persons do not find anything wrong in stealing even the belongings of their neighbours in the slum. Shopkeepers in the slum live in a small shelter at the side of their shops. They make a fair bit of money; I would often wonder why they don't live somewhere better. A Marwari trader told me, 'Forget about living outside the slum. If I stay away from the shop for even a night, there is no guarantee that anything will be left in the shop the next day.'

Some persons believe in the law of grabbing whatever they can from others in the slum, snatching away from another whatever they want. A family with more young boys has an advantage over others. Even dogs do not suffer as do old women living alone. Water reaches the public tap in the slum for a short while. It is understood that all should fill up some vessels with water, take them to the hut and use the water there. Such a rule is of benefit to all, but rowdy women from powerful households with bullies at their beck and call sit near the tap and do their cleaning and washing there itself. As a result, other women cannot even get their supply of drinking water.

Fuel, water and food are such simple, normal needs; but in a slum the amount of effort required to get them is overwhelming. Forget about education, art, cultural development and things like that. There is no custom of sending children to school. First, children can be put to work instead of going to school. Second, the parents do not believe that these social institutions will be able to give the child a status in the social structure, even after ten to twelve years of education. They have no relations with schools, post offices or banks. There is no home-delivery of letters in a slum. The few letters which do come land up at the house of a social activist or at a shop. If the addressee is fortunate, he gets them. A bank is an unknown institution. Hence, private money-lending has prospered. The shopkeepers and restaurant-owners lend money at exorbitant rates of interest.

A barber approached a social activist in a slum and told him, 'I took five rupees on loan from the Marwari, and he has taken my instrument-box as surety. How am I to earn my living?' The activ-

ist angrily called the Marwari over, and told him to return the box. The three agreed that the barber would repay the loan starting in two days, at the rate of 50 paise per day. On the third day, the Marwari approached the activist and told him, 'The barber has not paid the money. I returned the box because of you; now tell me what to do?' The worker called for the barber, but he did not appear. Neither did he return the money. The activist himself paid the trader the five rupees. He learnt his lesson: sensible people should not get involved in such disputes.

Addiction is a terrible feature of this high-pressure life. Every evening, the writ of liquor runs supreme in the slum. After drinking, even a tattered man becomes a bully; he walks around with his chest stuck out. At the slightest provocation, knives come out and bloody fights ensue. Already weak bodies are further ruined by liquor. Minor illnesses lead to death. When a man dies, his wife and children begin a terrible struggle in an already insecure atmosphere. Children have to forget their childhood and work like adults.

A woman came to our clinic for medicine. Her husband worked in the goods yard. He sustained a minor injury while carrying tiles. He did not get the wound dressed because that would have meant a day's leave. Finally, the wound festered and he died. 'What do you do?' I asked his widow.

'Nothing, I stay at home,' she replied.

'Then how do you eat?'

'My elder son is about twelve years old. He works in a hotel for a rupee a day.'

'How can so many manage with just a rupee? Why don't you work?'

'My eldest son has forbidden it. He says, "Mother, you sit at home. You are our support; if you go to work and something happens to you, we will be without any protection. Then where are we to go?" That is why I don't work.'

I was astounded by this wisdom from a twelve-year old boy. But what difference does it make? You may be a wise man or a fool,

but once you are yoked to this wheel, you turn into a beast of burden, and so you remain till the end.



A slum is a large factory for the conversion of men into animals. Any person who comes here or is born here becomes a part of this dehumanized culture. In a slum, one is either a bull, at the beck and call of his master, a brutal beast, or a pig that enjoys rolling in muck. How else can one make any sense of the punter's life: arrested at the distillery and pushed into a jail cell, the way an animal is pushed into its cage?

If we consider ourselves human beings, then we must make an effort to come to terms with this large mass of humanity caught up in this vicious cycle of poverty and squalour. We must remember that slum-dwellers perform innumerable services for the city, and that their problems deserve to be solved as a matter of social priority.

We turned a blind eye to slums when they were proliferating all around. Only when the problem became unbearable, started affecting the civic life of the city, did we wake from our slumber. Some refer to slums as 'scabies' or 'cancer' and vow to root them out. Now that civic life is on the verge of collapse, we have begun to scurry around frantically.

Some people entertain the romantic notion of solving the problem of slums by shifting the slum-dwellers into well-built concrete homes. They build such houses and then offer them for sale at 'Just five thousand rupees'. When the slum-dwellers fail to respond, the same romantic lot says, 'Look, we want to give them good houses but these people prefer to live in hell; what are we to do?' How many slum-dwellers could possibly afford such houses?

Besides, providing identical houses to all will only create more problems. All slum-dwellers have their own particular needs. I asked a coolie living in Lohia Nagar, 'Would you like to live in a new house built by the municipal corporation?' and he retorted, 'Where would I tie my bull? And where would I park my cart?' It is better that all should be given freedom to build their houses according to



their needs. One can prepare a layout plan for the settlement and make provision for civic amenities, in order that the atmosphere there will not be harmful to the residents and the city as whole. Above all, the slum-dwellers should get an assurance that they will not be evicted from there. Even this much could achieve a lot. The man who stays there would one day build his own house and make every effort to build it at the lowest possible cost. His initiative and innovation must be encouraged.

Decisions to shift slums must be taken with care. Undue haste can mean that the residents are deprived of their means of livelihood and what would be achieved by that? In Shivajinagar, there are many people who fill kerosene in tanks fitted upon tricycles, and then drive around the city selling it. These people were shifted out and resettled in Bibdevadi, five or six miles away, at the other end of the city. Now, these people must drag their tricycles all the way to the goods yard before they can begin their daily trade. When resettling slums, proper planning is required – what trades do the people engage in, how far can they be shifted without affecting their livelihood. It is a simple matter of conscience – which is more important, the livelihood of slum-dwellers or ensuring that foreign tourists arriving at the airport are greeted by pleasant sights?

Large sections of our rural population are rushing towards the cities because of certain economic policies and long-standing faults in our social set-up. Unless these errors are corrected and old social injustices righted with a firm resolve, the exodus to the cities will continue. When the municipal corporation announces, 'Henceforth not a single hut will be permitted in the city,' all it shows is that they are unaware of the process by which slums are created or have not yet been able to appreciate the gravity of the problem. We have to accept that people from the villages will continue to flood our cities for many years to come. We should, therefore, provide land in or near our cities, provide basic civic amenities, and thus ensure from the outset that the settlements grow in a planned manner.

The Government or the municipal corporation alone cannot solve this problem. There are those who call themselves 'radical

leftist', make suggestions and demands to the Government, and criticise it when it proves unsuccessful – even these intellectuals cannot solve this problem. The urban poor are an alienated lot today, and the better-off sections of society must set aside all their prejudices and interact freely with them. Social organizations like the Rotary, Lions, and Giants Clubs, along with other political organizations can win the confidence of slum-dwellers by actually working amongst them and training them in basic hygiene, sanitation and temperance. All this may sound trivial and simplistic, but it is important from the slum-dwellers' point of view.

It is a well-known fact that a committed activist can transform the life of a slum. In the workers' slum of Ganesh Nagar, such a thing is already happening. This slum has well-laid out roads. The slum is divided into numbered wards. If a resident does not dump his garbage at the designated spot, on the following day the entire locality dumps its garbage in front of the erring man's hut. This has brought some discipline to the community. To maintain cleanliness, fifty paise are collected every month from each hut. From the fund thus collected, a sanitation worker is appointed to keep the public toilets clean and a few poor women to sweep the roads of the slum. The youth club has campaigned against the nearby liquor stills and had had them closed down.

It is wrong to say that conditions in slums cannot improve. If a team of committed activists can come together, if they get the support of concerned intellectuals, the intensity of the problem can be considerably mitigated.

Wanderers and Nomads

The wide expanse of the plain is relieved only by a solitary hillock. A solid stone temple dedicated to Lord Kanifnath stands on its summit. Stone steps lead from the bottom of the hill all the way to the top. On the plain, at the foot of the hill, swirls a crowd of around one hundred and fifty thousand people, gathered for the fair. At one edge of the plain are hundreds of nomadic families with their tents, or even living out in the open.

Under every tree are crude stone idols and pictures of various gods, all coated with sacred vermilion powder, and bunches of peacock feathers and similar decorative materials. A shaman, clad in saffron, possessed by a spirit, goes round and round in circles, humming rhythmically. A man from the crowd around him lifts up his sick child and asks, 'When will he be cured?' As he spins around, the saffron-clad *baba* suggests a remedy to ward off divine displeasure. Some distance away, under another tree, a woman is being exorcised of evil spirits. The revolving man there hits her on the head and on the back with a slipper that has a horseshoe affixed to its sole.

The families on the plain have spread small stones, copper and silver icons, and wooden dolls around themselves and are performing *pujas*. I approach one of them and – pointing to one of the icons – ask which god it represents. 'That's an icon in the name of my father-in-law,' replies a woman sitting there.

'Are icons made for every person?' I ask.

'No. My father-in-law was a virtuous man. With his own hands, he cut out his own kneecap, put oil in it and using it as a lamp,

placed it before God. That is why this icon has been made in his name.'

Large numbers of devotees proceed towards the temple of Lord Kanifnath in small groups, carrying festive flags mounted on bamboo poles, dancing to the rhythm of *dhol-zanja*, the traditional drums and cymbals of the trade. Each of those groups is led by a dozen or so bare-torsoed men, dancing frenziedly to the rhythm of the drums and cymbals, as if possessed. Tapering whips with handles as thick as an arm are tied around the waists of these men.

A massive crowd is gathered in the premises of the Kanifnath temple at the top of the hill. Wave upon wave of devotees with their flags continue to pour in. The dancers' frenzy increases, and they lash themselves across their bare backs with whips. One of them, not satisfied with whipping himself, hands his whip to another who begins to whip him across the back. But the devotee is not satisfied and begins to shout at the other to whip him even harder. The whip makes weals across his back, which begins to swell up.

A fire has been lit in front of the idol in the temple and a group of women, hair loose, sit around it possessed, their bodies swaying rhythmically. The flags are first touched to the crest of the temple and then placed in its backyard. Behind the temple stand a number of bearded *fakirs*, clad in colourful costumes, begging for alms. The Muslim priest in charge of the temple makes futile attempts to control the crowd.

As I come down the staircase, I see three devotees going up to the temple. At each stair, the man in the centre removes a coconut from the gunny bag held by one of the others, breaks it into two halves against the stair and then puts the two halves into another gunny bag held by the third individual. I ask what was he is doing. 'Repaying divine debts,' pants one of the men accompanying him.

The *zatra* bazaar has occupied the entire field below the temple. Unusual items, not seen in regular *zstras*, are among the articles being traded: gunny sacks for carrying goods on the backs of don-

keys; reins made of twigs of the *ambadi* plant, meant for tying donkeys; tarpaulins for tents; traditional cots made of jute thread; tools; blankets of coarse wool; large wooden pans and stirring spoons; silver earrings; and ringlets for women's toes.

A donkey market has also come up at one corner of the field.

Never before have I seen around thousand donkeys at one time in one place. Some of the donkeys are even adorned with tasseled pompoms on their foreheads and hoofs. Half a dozen people have gathered round one specimen. They examine the beast, open its mouth, look at its teeth, run their hands along its limbs. They begin to bargain with the owner. He quotes a price of three hundred rupees. The customers want it for a hundred. Then they all begin to haggle, in a manner which resembles a quarrel. The owner screams at the top of his voice, 'Three hundred! Three hundred! Three hundred!' The buyers yell back, 'No, no, no, no.' The buyers start shouting, 'A hundred and twenty five, hundred and twenty five!' The owner yells back, 'No, no!' The owner pushes the customers by their shoulders, saying, 'Speak up, speak up.' In the ensuing scuffle, some of the prospective buyers actually fall down. While all this goes on, the owner as well as the customers slap the donkey on its back or even give it a few raps with a stick. Despite all this commotion, the donkey just stands there quietly. 'Why are they hitting the donkey?' I ask one of the onlookers. 'To make sure that the beast is hardy enough,' he replies.

There is a herd of white donkeys in one corner. These are the famous Kathiawar donkeys. Able to survive even in the Rann of Kutch, they cost more because of their sturdy constitution. The Kathiawaris bring these donkey herds all the way from Kathiawar in Gujarat on foot, and make the rounds of the donkey *bazaars* at Jejuri, Junnar, and Madhi, before returning.

'Why do you prefer donkeys as a means of transportation?' I ask one of the nomads.

'We travel through hilly terrain, where a bullock-cart is of no use,' explains the nomad. 'Only donkeys will do. They will climb even a vertical face. Besides, the donkey is a very intelligent crea-

ture. We don't have to give it any special fodder or feed. It finds its own food in the countryside around. It is not a burden on its owner. Besides, it won't even get stolen, because however hard the thief may beat it, it won't move without its master. And the moment it sees its master, it starts off. Take the case of a stonecutter who uses his donkey to transport sand, and takes a break for chewing tobacco. The donkey understands this. He goes to the side of the road and stands there at an angle; all the master need do is give it a nudge. When night falls, if the master just stands in front of the hitching-post and mimes the action of tying it up, the donkey assumes it has been tied and it will stand "chained" obediently throughout the night, till the master mimes the action of untying it the next morning. A farmer using a donkey to crush maize just takes the beast to the crushing-pan and mimes the action of tying it to the pole in the centre of the pan. The donkey then goes on moving around the pole in a circle, as if tied to the pole, and does its job quietly.'

As the sun climbs higher, I move to the shade of a tree. As I sit there, an elderly man wearing a turban comes up to me and touches my feet. He then touches the feet of every single person sitting there, including those of the small children as well. For a moment, every person stares at him in surprise. 'He must have made a *navas* to God,' someone mutters, and everyone gets back to whatever they have been doing.

In the afternoon, the family opposite us unties one of the lambs tethered to a tree. One of them takes it before the idol there and, holding its legs, pins it firmly to the ground. Another man grips its mouth in one hand, and with a knife in the other severs its neck with two rough slashes, much as if it were a turnip. The blood spurts out from the neck of the decapitated creature with a gurgling sound. The remaining lambs begin to jump with fear at the sight. One by one, they too are slaughtered.

One of the men sticks the lamb's head onto a spit and begins to roast it, like a cob of corn, on a temporary *chulha* made of three stones. The second man hangs the lamb's carcass on one of the tree's branches, slits open its abdomen and begins to pull out its long rope-like entrails.

Every possible tribe is represented here. Vaidus, Kaikadis, Kolhatis, and Wadars are in the majority. Everybody hangs around in groups, talking and arguing, engaging in financial transactions. Money borrowed now will be repaid in the next *zatra*; the borrower and the lender will not meet before then. All transactions are oral. Marriages are being arranged and broken off, dowries are being negotiated. Quarrels break out at the slightest provocation and scuffles ensue. Occasionally, thorny *babul* branches from the fires opposite are employed as weapons. But things settle down in a few minutes.

Special conclaves of each tribe and caste will be held in the *zatra* from the next day onwards. Everybody sits in a circle and matters are sorted out in the presence of the *panchas* of each tribe. Hired representatives, quarrelling like lawyers, will argue at the top of their voices. This goes on for a week and then the whole area reverts to its customary desolation.



The lives, the gods and the inhuman penances of these nomadic tribes – all these are at great variance with the world of ordinary folk. One wonders whether one is in the midst of people from an unknown African country. As each aspect of their lives opens up before your eyes, you feel they are still living in the Stone Age – much as humans did ten thousand years ago.

How much the life of humans has changed over the millennia from prehistoric times to the present day! A large part of society has changed completely. Yet today, at this very moment, these nomadic tribes serve as poignant reminders of the uncivilised, fear-stricken, uncultured life of prehistoric man. Their lives have not moved beyond the nomadic, sheep grazing days of the past. Even today, they can be seen wandering the grasslands with their herds, hunting small animals for food. A unicellular organism like an amoeba has finally evolved into a complex creature like a human being, and yet the evolutionary tree, with human beings at the apex, still has place for the amoeba. Something similar has happened to these nomadic tribes. In our cities, where big buildings come up within a few weeks due to the availability of prefabricated

cated materials, these nomadic folk can be seen living in straw huts, journeying on the tar roads of our busy cities with their tarpaulins, straw mats and tattered garments loaded on donkeys, headed for their next destination.

In the midst of a society which sends manned rockets into space, with astronauts actually journeying through space and walking on the surface of the Moon, these nomads literally tremble before Mariaai and Mhasoba, their primitive deities, and sacrifice thousands of animals every year to propitiate them.

The existence of such terrifying gods and the extreme forms of worship were natural in ancient society. Humanity knew so little about nature's forces that anything that did not fit into the routine of daily life was dubbed a miracle or the effect of divine wrath. A woman delivering twins would be branded an adulteress and probably be killed together with her newborn by some of the ancient tribes. Just as an animal is reluctant to eat anything other than its customary food, humans were scared of the unknown. In these regions, the fear of nature gave rise to the creation of protective mother goddesses like Jokhai, Mariaai, Bollhai, Satwai, etc. Animal sacrifice, self-laceration and self-torture were the ways of gaining the favour of these goddesses. Later man became a shepherd and started wandering through the mountains and plateaus. This contact with nature provided some knowledge about natural events and processes. It is during this period that patriarchal deities like Khandoba, Bapujiboa, Mhasoba, Vetala etc., who were milder but still terrifying, were invented.

The worship of these deities became a gentler art once humans took to settled agriculture. As humans learnt more about nature, their culture became more complex and various religious philosophies came into existence. The saints' tradition in Maharashtra mounted a concerted assault on the worship of these mother goddesses and patriarchal gods. Couplets were composed to express disapproval of these terrifying deities and to popularise the gentler '*bhakti-marg*' or the 'path of devotion', centred around the cult of Vithoba, a much softer god, who can be reached if his name is invoked with devotion:

'Not Jokhai, not Jakhai, nor Mayarani nor Mesabai;

Mightier than these is Pandharirao, the God of these gods, 'or,

'May the faces of Vetals and allied gods be blackened,

Cherish none other than the husband of Rakhumai in your heart, says Tuka.'

(The historian D.D. Kosambi has suggested that nomadic tribes from the hilly Konkan region of Maharashtra shifted with their herds during the monsoons to the plateau regions which had less rainfall and plenty of grass. These tribes would return to the hilly regions when the monsoons came to an end. This migration continued for thousands of years before the advent of settled agriculture. The saints in Maharashtra adapted this age-old seasonal mi-



gration into the *Varkari dindi*, a popular pilgrimage, and thus brought about a confluence of two different traditions.)

Though mainstream society incorporated these religious reforms about seven or eight hundred years ago, the nomadic tribes here remained in the firm grip of ancient gods and goddesses. Some of the traditions of these nomadic people are so archaic that one can trace them to prehistoric times. These tribes not only follow the rituals of worship of our prehistoric ancestors; their entire lifestyle is that of Stone Age humans.

These nomadic tribes are, however, unlike tribals who live in communities in forests away from mainstream society. Nomadic tribes like the Vaidus, Kaikadis and Wadars earn their living through various means within mainstream society. Communities like the Joshis, Chirtakathis, Vasudevs, Gondhalis, Davaris, Bairagis, etc. survive by begging. The Kolhatis, Dombaris, Makadwalas and Madaris earn their living by putting up roadside shows. Phaasepardhis, Marwari-Kumbhars and Kanjarbhats are communities which survive through robbing and stealing. The vexing question is that when all these communities live amidst us and interact with our mainstream culture, how is it that we find them still trapped in the Stone Age?



Recently, some Vaidus have set up permanent dwellings at Hadapsar. The Vaidus are a nomadic community. They travel through the villages, along the riversides, collecting local medicinal herbs, hunting animals whose organs have medicinal properties, and selling their medicinal concoctions to the local people. Sticking to the river banks has many advantages – the donkeys, dogs and cats in their entourage get access to water, and graze on the grass growing along the banks. They usually can also catch hares, monitor lizards and snakes in the shrubbery, and trap wild boars in the woods, maybe even catch a crocodile or tortoise in the river.

Laxmanrao Shinde is a prominent Vaidu living in the Hadapsar settlement. He has been a hunter all his life. 'Our dogs are our

main weapons in our various hunting expeditions,' he told me. 'They may appear nondescript, but they are excellent hunters! We kill wild boar and foxes. The small dogs bark and drive these animals out of the shrubbery. We hide some distance away behind the cactus bushes with our larger dogs, and release them as soon as the prey approaches close enough. These dogs chase the prey, catch it by its neck and bring it down, by which time we are there with our spears. Sugarcane farmers invite us to their fields – we catch the foxes and hares which damage the sugarcane crop.'

Shinde also told me their method of catching porcupines. A simple tapering cylindrical barbed wire trap, without any levers or flaps, is placed at the mouth of a burrow. When the porcupine enters the trap, it cannot move forward as the trap steadily narrows; neither can it retreat as its quills get caught in the wires.

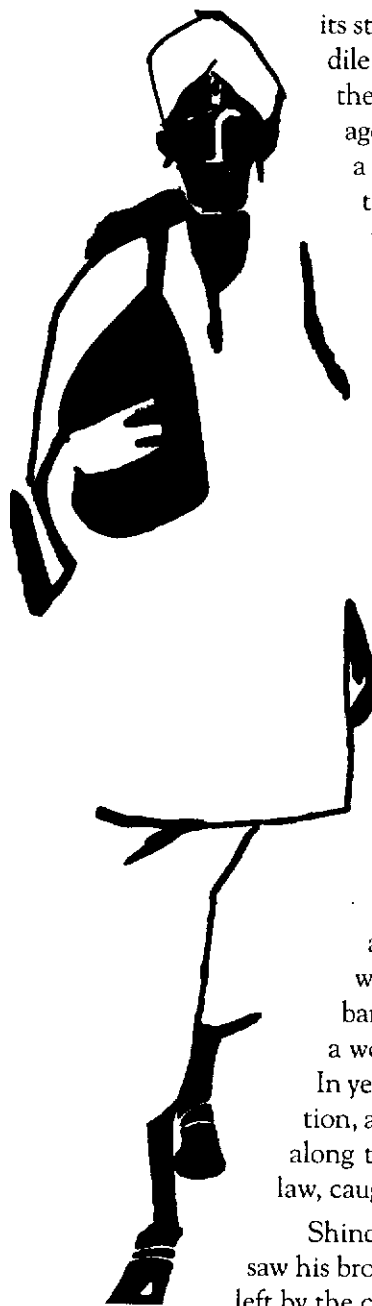
Vaidus relish hare meat. Often they drop their routine work and spend entire days hunting hares.

The technique they use to catch crocodiles is worth recounting:

'We enter the water where a crocodile has been spotted and plant bamboo poles across that part of the river, from the bank to the deeper waters. This helps in gauging the level of water at any point in the river. We then step into the water with our sticks and shafts and probe for the creature. Once we find the crocodile, we use our sticks to force her towards the shallower waters. As soon as she is past the bamboo marking-poles, we encircle her. We then slowly close in with our nets, holding one end in our hands and the other between our toes. The crocodile comes very close to our feet and then tries to break free from the net. Once one of us manages to slip a noose round her mouth, we simply slip our hands beneath her belly and lift her out like a baby. There is a small bead-like bone on her neck; one knock on that with our scythe and the creature is dead.'

'But doesn't she bite when she is so close to your feet?'

'The crocodile doesn't like to open its mouth in water,' Shinde explained. 'If it does that, for sure two buckets of water will enter



its stomach, a prospect it hates. A crocodile will attack men or animals only when they are on the shore. A couple of years ago, in the Mula-Mutha river, we killed a crocodile which measured about twenty-five feet in length. The creature had terrorized the local people and no fisherman dared to enter the river for fear. We tried to catch her, but twice she tore the net and got away. We had a second go at catching the obstinate animal and this time we succeeded in pushing her towards the shallow water. One of our boys managed to mount her back. He pushed a bamboo stick between her jaws as soon as she opened her mouth. It virtually stood in her snout like a lock; as a result, she could not close her jaws. She was helpless. We then managed to tie a cord around her menacing mouth and dragged her out of the water by her tail. We slaughtered the creature and distributed her meat among all the hunters. And do you know what we found in her belly? Silver bangles and rings. She had swallowed a woman and two children in the past. In yet another crocodile hunting expedition, a crocodile which was running amok along the river bank attacked my son-in-law, caught hold of his hand and broke it.'

Shinde then called his son-in-law and I saw his broken hand. I could also see the scars left by the crude surgical attempts to mend it.

Vaidus also hunt tortoises. Laxmanrao once caught a tortoise as big as a bullock-cart wheel. The Vaidus remove the shell off the animal and eat the meat inside. When I remarked that there is little danger in a tortoise hunt, he immediately broke in, 'It's not like that. A tortoise does not have separate teeth like other creatures. Its one-piece circular jawbone is like one continuous tooth. If it gets a grip on your finger, it's gone.'

On *Nag-Panchami*, or the snake festival, Vaidus go round from house to house, exhibiting snakes and asking for money. One of Shinde's sons, Shidda by name, pulled out a cane basket from under the cot, opened its lid and showed me the cobra inside. 'We catch cobras before *Nag-Panchami*,' said Shinde. 'If we fail to catch any, then we buy or hire a snake from the Madaris. This is the only day we earn money by exhibiting cobras to the people. We celebrate our *Nag-Panchami* a day before the actual *Nag-Panchami*. We flood the holes in anthills, where cobras live, with liquor until they are full.'

There were many animals in Shinde's tiny house. Two or three dogs were tied in one corner. There was also a blue-eyed 'English' cat. A one-and-a-half year old child kept picking it up by the scruff of its neck and, after clambering onto a cot, dropping it onto the floor. As the child kept repeating this trick, his mother looked on with admiration.

A three-foot long monitor lizard was tied to one leg of the cot. Another child, two or three years old, was constantly jabbing it with a stick. 'What do you do with monitor lizards?' I asked. 'All its parts and organs possess medicinal properties,' Shinde replied. 'Besides, its skin is used to make money purses, belts and straps.' He then took down some monitor lizard hides from the hooks on which they were suspended and showed them to me. They were fully dried and stiff like *papads*. The next time I visited Shinde's house, the monitor lizard was nowhere to be seen. When I asked Shinde's daughter-in-law, she told me, 'We ate it – the child here insisted and we could not refuse.' (Somebody once told me that Vaidus even eat cats.)

The greater the number of creatures a Vaidu owns, the greater the respect he commands within the tribe. Even though such a man be poor, a Vaidu giving his daughter to him in marriage reasons: 'A man who can feed all these animals will certainly be able to feed my daughter.' But a rich Vaidu who does not own any pets invites the reasoning, 'How can such a man feed my daughter, if he cannot feed a few animals?'

Vaidus have dark complexions, sturdy bodies and sharp vision. They wear a thick gold earring. They carry large sacks, tied to one end of a bamboo pole held across one shoulder; with one hand holding down the other end of the pole, they walk with back slightly bent. (Some Vaidus carry a *jholi*. The *jholiwala* Vaidus and those who carry sacks on bamboo poles do not intermarry.) They move around, calling out at the top of their voice, 'Cure for gas and rheumatic trouble!' or, 'Come, buy precious gold and coral ash!' They are expert at luring potential customers with their captivating and smooth sales talk. When they meet a prospective client, they start off casually with: 'Do you have a *bidi*?' And then whenever it seems appropriate, they follow with statements like, 'You have recently had two major accidents, but were fortunate enough to survive them.' And once the client is seduced, assurances follow, 'I will make you so robust that even if you jump off a rooftop, you will bounce like a football!' Unlike a doctor, he does not ask for the patient's medical history; instead, he merely feels his pulse and continues to chatter away, without giving a chance to the client to recover from the spell. His persuasive skill is usually so effective that even the biggest miser is willing to give the shirt off his own back to the prattling Vaidu. And while accepting what he gives, the Vaidu has the temerity to say, 'You haven't given me anything; I haven't asked for anything; all I have done is read your mind!'

Vaidus have only a limited knowledge of medicine. Some of them liaise with drug stores selling herbal medicines, bring customers to the shop to buy precious *suvarna bhasma* (gold ash) and other similar expensive remedies, and palm off ordinary ash. The Vaidu then collects three-fourths share of the profit from the shop owner.

One of my friends lost much of his hair and developed a bald patch when still young. He was taken to a Vaidu by one of his wrestler friends. The Vaidu said, 'I think you have developed worms inside your head. They devour the roots of your hair. But first I will have to check whether there are really some worms inside.' Saying this, the Vaidu heated and sterilised a needle, and pricked my friend's scalp with it. He then pretended to suck something from the pricked area with the help of a hollow metallic tube. He then upended the tube in front of my friend, and maggots, such as are found in grain, came out of that tube. My friend, realizing that he was being tricked, gave the Vaidu two resounding slaps and drove him away.

Vaidus are expert conmen. Using sleight of hand, a Vaidu will display some worms in the blood extracted from a client, and then assure him, 'Look, I have cured you of your disease. Now give me four measures of grain! Your coat and cap as well!' When they hear of an unwed mother-to-be, they start hovering about her house. 'We have all kinds of medicines. One potion for a one-month old pregnancy, another if the pregnancy is two months gone,' they keep repeating. As days pass, the people become impatient and call for the Vaidu. Needless to say, the Vaidu earns very well on such occasions.

Vaidus have weird cures. I could see a large ulcer three inches wide on Laxmanrao's knee. I asked him what the problem was. 'I suffered some heavy bruising on my knee,' he said. 'As a result of it, I could not move it freely. I then burnt the skin over my knee with some medicine and now, see, I can move it freely,' he said, doing so and at the same time driving away the flies buzzing around the open wound.

An expert Ayurvedic doctor once told me, 'These Vaidus roam around the forests, so the Ayurvedic *Vaidyas* would employ them to fetch medicinal herbs and plants. In the process, the Vaidus vicariously picked up the knowledge and later began to sell the herbal medicines themselves.'

Laxmanrao's son Shiddu also practises medicine. However, he does not carry the traditional sack on his shoulder but carries his medications in a hand-held leather bag. He showed them to me. They were kept in plastic bottles and glass vials. He told me, 'Now the law does not permit us to practise our trade unless we have a proper registration to do so. But we say, put us through courses, conduct the necessary examinations and issue us registration only if we pass the examination. But the course should begin after the seventh standard rather than after matriculation. The latter option would be useless, as very few people from our community study up to matriculation level.'

Children who have studied up to the seventh standard are, in fact, rare among the Vaidus. When I met one Vaidu, Yellappa Vaidu Guruji, who has B.A. and B.Ed. degrees, I asked him, 'How did you manage to study so much?' He had studied in a school run by the Gadge Mission. He would repeatedly run away, but one of his teachers would go to his house, thrash him and bring him back to the school, and it was thus that he completed his education. The Gadge mission school provided free board and lodging to the students and yet he kept running away. I found this surprising and asked him the reason.

He told me: 'We are used to begging for our food, and are therefore used to eating a wide variety of foods from different homes. The school food, always from the same kitchen, did not appeal to me.'

Talking about the Vaidu trade, he said, 'I always tell my people that if they want to practise this trade, they must first be educated. "Practice this trade only if you have a good education. Leave the trade if you are uneducated."'

Vaidu women wander around the villages with headloads of bundles with conical tops, containing needles and oil-nuts called *bibbas*, which they sell to village folk. They sell these items and get *bhakris*. They also forage in the rough terrain of the forests and hills and collect *kumbhe* (conical soft white stones), roast them and then crush them to make *Rangoli* powder to sell during Deepavali.

The language of the Vaidus is Telugu. They are more articulate when compared to other nomadic tribes. Their hunting habits make them more aggressive. Their customs and mores are also radically different. If a girl born in a Vaidu house has a whorl of hair either on her forehead or head, it is considered a bad omen and that girl is given away to a *dombari* or even killed. If such a girl is allowed to live, her marriage becomes a problem, as the belief is that the husband of such a girl would die an early death. Yellappa Guruji married such a girl. 'This man is sure to die within six months,' everyone prophesied. Yellappa Guruji has been married for the last five years.

An average Vaidu spends lavishly on *zatra*s and marriages; as a result, Vaidus are always in debt to the more affluent people of the community. A Vaidu family is expected to sacrifice at least four goats in the yearly *zatra*. In addition to this, whenever a member of his family falls sick, he must sacrifice a couple of goats to propitiate the gods. A *zatra* costs him more than a thousand rupees. If the mandatory goat sacrifice has not been made, and a child in the family happens to fall ill, a Vaidu (although himself a healer) calls in a *Devarshi* or witch-doctor. The Vaidu then confesses, 'My child is ill because I did not offer a goat to the gods.' In a *zatra*, thousands of goats are slaughtered in just one day. The temple courtyard is lined with innumerable heads and legs of slaughtered goats, and the floor is caked with blood. Soil is spread over this blood and red-hot glowing coals laid over it. The devotees then walk on this bed of fire. Yellappa Guruji, however, preached the message that each family should sacrifice only one goat. When his reform was actually implemented in one area, the entire community was shaken. But that was the end of it; his reforms did not catch on. Laxmanrao commented on this: 'We do not agree with this thinking. We go into the forest for hunting and who protects us there? God, right? Then how can you be miserly in this matter? At most, one can avoid making promissory offerings.'

Among Vaidus, there is a bride-price for girls. These days, the going rate is six to seven thousand rupees. (In some areas, this is as low as five hundred rupees.) The girl is literally purchased. If an

old man pays the right amount of money and buys a twelve-year-old girl, even her father doesn't object to such a matrimonial alliance. I talked about this to one of the Vaidus. 'If you get a good customer for your donkey, do you enquire whether the customer is young or old? We deal with whomsoever is ready to pay the right price.' Yellappa Guruji campaigned for fixing the bride-price at one thousand rupees, but this did not elicit any response. The exorbitant bride-price creates a problem for the poor young men of the community. There are some Vaidus who enter into a contract with a pregnant woman. She is paid one thousand rupees. If she gives birth to a girl, the girl is handed over to the buyer; if she gives birth to a boy, the customer loses the money. This transaction is called 'buying the vegetable in the womb'.

Such early marriages cause great problems and many young girls run away because they are unable to get along with their husbands. The money spent by the first husband is wasted, and so he approaches the *Jati Panchayat*. The judges of the *Jati Panchayat* then decide who is at fault and force the new husband to return the dowry, or at least a part of it, to the earlier husband. In one instance, the matter dragged on for years, and when the judges delivered the verdict, they asked the new husband of the girl to 'either return the bride or pay a fine.' The man chose to return the bride. The original husband welcomed her even though she had lived with the other man for five or six years. As if this were not enough, the original husband complained to the *Jati Panchayat* that the other man usurped his dowry by taking away his wife. The man obliged by giving the interest on the dowry in the form of the two children he had from the woman.

To settle internal disputes, Vaidus too – like other nomadic tribes – have an institution of *Jati Panchayats*. People complain to the *Jati Panchayat* on a variety of issues: verbal abuse, non-repayment of loans, eloping with another's wife, etc. The local *Jati Panchayat* (called *Ganv Jati Panchayat* among the Vaidus) then sits to pass judgement on these issues. Such *Jati Panchayats* consist of men who come from the Patil clan among the *Vaidu* community. The judges sit in a circle and then the complainant breaks

a twig and throws it into the ring. 'Whose twig is this?' ask the *panchas*, and the complainant comes forward. 'Who is connected with this twig?' ask the judges. In response, the accused is supposed to come forward of his own accord. (If he fails to show up, the complainant gives his name and he is fined for the non-appearance.) The judges then charge a sum of hundred rupees from both the complainant and the accused for 'invoking the twig.' Then the meeting is adjourned till the next day. At this time, a further two hundred rupees is collected from each of the contending parties for 'village expenses' and the assembled people are given a festive meal with mutton and liquor. The second day's meeting too comes to an end, only to start again the next day. The two parties are given an opportunity to present their case. There are a few people in the community, famous for their lawyerly talk. The complainant and the defendant then spend more money to fetch these fellows from wherever they may be. They argue their client's case, quarreling at the top of their voices. This may go on for days on end. Previous verdicts and pronouncements made elsewhere by other *Jati Panchayats* are quoted. In the midst of all this chaos, cases often do not get settled in one meeting and have to be adjourned. A venue 'under the five mango trees', near Dehu is famous among the Vaidus. A decision is taken to meet at some such venue after a couple of months. Again the lawyers shout at the top of their voices. Before announcing the verdict, the judges take a surety of five hundred rupees from each party to ensure compliance with their verdict. If one of the parties does not agree with the verdict, they can appeal to another *Jati Panchayat*. However, the *panchas* decide which *Jati Panchayat* has to be appealed to. In all this *Jati Panchayat* business, the *panchas* make plenty of money, as they are usually hand in glove and propose each other's names for the appellate forum. The case goes from one village to another. Finally it reaches the *zatra* of Junnar. If this judgement too is appealed against, the matter is referred to the *Jati Panchayat* sitting in the Jejuri *zatra*. The verdict given here can be appealed only in one forum: the famous *zatra* of Madhi.

If the verdict is not accepted even after this, then both parties have to undergo a ritual called '*iman-praman*' to test the veracity

of their claims. Shiddu, Laxmanrao Shinde's son, told me, 'They are asked to carry an unbaked earthen pot full of water to the temple of Kanifnath located on the top of the hill. The person whose pot breaks first is considered guilty. Or, a handful of rice is washed and kept on the leaf of a creeper called *Nagveli*. Both the parties are then asked to take a bath, chew a little bit of that rice and spit it out. The saliva of the man who is innocent will be milky white, but the rice turns into a thick sticky ball in the mouth of the guilty one. If the guilty party still does not relent, he is once again given some rice to eat and this time he spits blood. The third time, the guilty man just cannot open his jaws.'

Complaints must be referred to the *Jati Panchayat* alone and the *Jati Panchayat* fines those who approach the government courts. There are some who insist on going to the government courts. After the verdict from such official courts, the cases are reopened by the *Jati-Panchayat*, and the *Jati Panchayat* determines the guilty party according to its own laws. He must then pay all the earlier court and legal expenses to his opponent.

Laxmanrao Shinde comes from the Patil clan of Vaidus and is well known for his integrity among the Vaidus. He is called 'the *Patil* from Pune' and is invited to preside over many *Jati Panchayats* sitting in different places. Laxmanrao goes to restore order wherever there is trouble within the tribe. He had once gone to Amalner, as the tribe there had become 'contaminated'. Many people there would collect a dowry of five to six thousand rupees and marry off their daughters; soon they would bring them back home on the pretext of some minor argument with the mother-in-law or son-in-law. The girl would then be given as a concubine to another person for seven to eight thousand rupees (concubines command a higher price). This had become a regular practice in Amalner and caused much suffering. Since influential men of the Vaidu community were involved in this practice, it became very difficult to get justice from the *Jati Panchayats*. The '*Patil* from Pune' was finally called in as a judge. He summoned the man who had first started this oppressive practice (a well-known *Patil* of the region) before the *Jati Panchayat*. Laxmanrao made him pay a large surety.

He arranged for a policeman to be present there. He made the *Patil* sign a confession on legal paper and then fined him in the presence of the policeman. He also nullified all the illegal arrangements and reverted matters to the earlier status.

'What is the punishment if a man elopes with another's wife?' I asked Laxmanrao.

'He must bring a virgin for the aggrieved husband,' he replied.

'If a man marries outside the caste?'

'Such a marriage has no status among us. However, if the man is willing to annul that marriage and marry a girl from the caste, then he is fined and allowed to remain within the caste. Else, he is excommunicated.'

'What do you do if a married woman is found to be having an adulterous relationship with another man?'

'This has to be proved conclusively. The husband's complaint alone has no value; there must be some other witness. We ask the husband to throw her out and forbid her father to take her back; else, he might earn more money by selling her as a concubine. We let her rot outside the caste. "Go ahead, woman, and do what you want, but don't pollute our caste," we tell her.'

The severest punishment among Vaidus is a fine of one paisa. 'If you fine a man a *cowree*, then you are considered to be a man worth just a *cowree*. If you are fined a *bidi*, then your value is reduced to that of a *bidi*'s smoke. Vaidus are terribly afraid of such ignominy,' said Shiddu.



The Kaikadis go from village to village making storage bins and baskets for use by farmers. They are settled in a particular village, and fan out to the other villages within a 10-12 mile radius soon after the rainy season comes to an end. They visit specific villages at fixed times of the year, live there for some time, make baskets and bins for sale and return to their homes before the next rains begin.

Wadars. Mati-Wadars are experts at digging. They dig the earth for laying the foundations for houses, do the initial digging on the site of a dam, lay underground drainage pipelines in cities, etc. If a village has a hill with stones nearby, Gadi-Wadars break up the stones there or in the stone quarries and haul big chunks of them down from the hills in carts with wooden wheels. Buffaloes pull such carts. Gadi-Wadars also construct bunds in the fields for farmers. Patharwat-Wadars break and chisel stones into many useful objects like mortars, pestles and grinders. They use donkeys to transport these stone articles from one village to another. The donkey is of great use to every kind of Wadar.

Wadars speak Telugu. Their work is so strenuous that there is no competition for them in their trade. Nowadays, many settlements of Wadars are coming up in cities, as there is a lot of construction activity there and a lot of stone is needed. They work in the stone quarries around the cities and live there in huts. They leave this base in search of a new one as soon as the quarry is exhausted. Breaking stones is hard and dangerous work. Explosives are used for quarrying. Accidents occur, but they are never paid any compensation.

Today, some Wadars have established themselves so well in their trade that they have become contractors supplying stones to others. They have become millionaires and live in bungalows. Some of them have distributed money liberally and established a foothold in politics. However, these leaders have done nothing for the welfare of the Wadar community. They, in fact, supply liquor as part of the wage to the Wadars working at their quarries, and ensure that the workers stay addicted.

Some Mati Wadars distil illicit liquor on a large scale. The Wadar colony in Pune is called 'Tashkent' – here taverns, gambling dens and brothels all are to be found.

Traditionally, the women of the Wadar community do not wear blouses. The reason? 'We are bound by the vow of Sitama.' According to tradition, Rama chased a golden deer when Sita demanded a blouse made of its skin – and thus started the whole Ramayana epic. Sita then ordered her heirs (the Wadars) never to

wear blouses – that is the legend still strong among the tribe. But there are some within the community who insist that the women should wear blouses. An activist named Alkunte, from Solapur, even went on a hunger strike with this demand.



Another hard-working tribe of construction-labourers has also begun to come into the cities. The women of this tribe wear long colourful skirts decorated with small round mirrors. They wear thick bangles made of bone or horn to decorate their wrists and arms. The bangles reach right over their forearms. They use ornate silver or brass clips to keep their hair in place. This is the famous Lamani or Banjara tribe. Lamanis live in large numbers in Andhra Pradesh, Marathwada and Vidharba. The tribe usually lives outside the periphery of a town, in the open mountainous plains. Their colonies are called *tandas* in Marathi.

In earlier times, the Lamanis used to wander throughout India. The British, however, encouraged them to settle down in fixed places by offering them barren mountainous land at a nominal price. Some of them accepted these offers, cultivated the land and became excellent farmers. Today, they have separated from the Banjara tribe, and call themselves Vanjaris. These Vanjaris are fairly affluent; an erstwhile Chief Minister of Maharashtra, Vasantrao Naik, was from this community. The ordinary Banjara, however, has remained quite impoverished and backward. Banjaras follow a very strict code. They never spend the night in any village and never wear new clothes. If they do get new clothes, they tear them apart, stitch them up again and only then wear them. Women are supposed to wear only traditional dress. They should not sleep on mattresses, but on the ground on hay or mats. They are not supposed to have lamps in their houses, nor even look at them. And so on.

When asked about this peculiar and inconvenient life-style, one of them told me, 'Actually, we are descendants of Rana Pratap. He was forced to leave Chittorgarh after he was defeated in war. From then on, we fixed these strict rules.' Of course, every clan

likes to claim an ancient, historical lineage, and this is the source of such legends. Shankarsingh Naik, a Banjara activist from Aurangabad says, 'None of this is true. Our community used bullocks to transport goods all over the country. We would even cross the Khyber Pass. When passing through forests, the Mughal soldiers would ambush us and carry away our beautiful women. Since then began the practice of our women disfiguring themselves. The bone bangles, tattered clothes, blackening one's own face, etc., are all the result of this. I have been campaigning within my community to weed out such customs. Skirts decorated with mirrors do not get washed every day and hair tied in such fashion is not washed often either. This lack of cleanliness is not good, but nobody pays me any heed. Our women are laden with ornaments, like bullocks labouring under a load. When the Banjara, Siddaram Guruji, compelled his wife to discard all her heavy ornaments, she was so unaccustomed to this that in the beginning she actually used to lose her balance while walking.'

Shankarsingh Naik told me he had attended a Banjara conclave in Chittor soon after India became independent. 'Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, told the Banjaras, "Chittorgarh has been liberated and your vow has been fulfilled. I am giving you land here to live on." Plots of land were distributed. But the Banjaras were not about to start living there! The habit of wandering will not die that easily. Not a single man occupied the plots.'

These Banjaras roam the mountains and collect natural gums, semi-precious stones, quartzes, and *tembhu* leaves (to roll bidis) and sell in the villages. They also collect firewood and grass and sell it as fuel on a regular basis. But they are badly exploited – for every hundred *tembhu* leaves, they get just three paise.

Banjaras are totally dominated by the Naik who is the leader of their group or *tanda*. He has one executive assistant and five *panchas*. Banjaras are known as cranks in the region. There is a popular folktale that they narrate with great pride: A Banjara walking through a village saw a Marwari sitting in front of his house twirling his moustache. The Banjara was insulted that the Marwari could twirl his moustache before a Rajput like himself. He un-

sheathed his sword and asked the Marwari to get ready for a duel. The Marwari was frightened, but to humour him, said, 'If one of us dies, our children and wives will be without any support, therefore, it is better that we kill them ourselves and then have the duel.' The Banjara went home, killed his wife and children and presented himself before the Marwari the next morning. 'I have killed my family, now let us fight the duel,' he said. The frightened Marwari said, 'Kill me if you so wish but first let me know what my crime is!' The Banjara replied, 'How dare you twirl your moustache in front of a Rajput?' The Marwari understood and said, 'Is that all? Look here, I am turning down the tips of my moustache in your honour. Now what?' Satisfied with the gesture, the Banjara went away.

Elaborate lamentation and weeping are part of every social function of the Banjara community. A prospective Banjara bride is expected to demonstrate her ability to cry as part of her skills. When asked the reason for this, an old Banjara told me, 'Earlier we lived in the forest. Mughal warriors would come at any time and molest our women. There was no guarantee that a man going to his wife's parental home to fetch her would return safely, so everybody would cry when he left. Similarly, the girls's family was not sure whether she would reach her husband's house safely, so they would cry as at her death. That is why every ceremony of ours includes weeping and lamentation.'



The palanquin bearers of the kings and nobility of old come from the Bhoi caste. They are also called Kahars or Dhivars. These people are dark-complexioned, well-built and strong. Some even resemble blacks. Bhois live by catching fish in rivers and streams. Dams and lift irrigation projects have caused a marked decline in the downstream river flow. Due to this, Bhois wander around searching for waterbodies. Even if they find one, they still have to face starvation as they find that other Bhois are already there.

A Bhoi from Bhor told me, 'There are about a hundred and fifty Bhoi families in this area. All the fish in the Nira river has

died because the paint manufacturing company, Arlabs, releases its effluent into it. The effluent kills all the fish, and we are out of business. Well, we asked them to at least employ our people in the factory, but no luck. We also catch fish in the ponds formed during the monsoon. But the local farmers have begun to spray pesticides on their crops, and the water from their fields seeps into these ponds, killing all the fish. Who will bear the responsibility for this?

Kisan Karale from Vinzar said: 'Local farmers soak the bark of *ramotha* in the river for seasoning. This too kills the fish. We used to fish in a nearby pond in Askawade; we would even build temporary bunds to hold the water. But the farmers quarrelled with us. "Your nets contaminate the water," they said, and stopped the fishing. They used their cattle to destroy the bunds and they tore up our nets. We did not want to get into a fight, so we kept quiet.'

In the monsoon, when the river is in spate, Kisan Karale ties four pumpkins round his waist and ferries milk and men back and forth. He gets paid for transporting the milk, but people must be taken free on 'humanitarian' grounds.

A Bhoi activist said, 'The government leases out the ponds and lakes to the Bhois. However, the rules governing the lease agreement differ from one district to another. Transportation of the fish is also problematic; besides, fish is highly perishable. Water from irrigation tanks is used for agriculture. The tanks run dry and the Bhois starve. The government should maintain at least five feet of water in the irrigation tanks.'

The Bhois raise watermelons and cucumbers on the alluvial river banks and earn some money from the activity during the summers. But now the farmers have evicted the Bhois and usurped these lands. The Bhois have been traditionally cultivating this land, but do not hold any legal title to it, so they are unable to establish their rights in court.

Some of the Bhois have been living in cities for a long time and sell *kurmure-dal* (puffed rice). A few of them have prospered.

There are different sub-castes among the Bhois: Zinga Bhoi, Pardeshi Bhoi, Raj Bhoi, Kahar, Godia Kahar, Kirat, Machhindra

Navadi (boatman), Gadhava (donkey) Bhoi, Khadi (creek) Bhoi, Khare Bhoi, etc. Some of these sub-castes intermarry, some do not. The Bhois offer goats as sacrifice in *zattras*. Their marriage rituals are not performed by Brahmin priests; instead, it is a prosperous Bhoi who presides. Widow remarriage is permitted. They bury their dead but do not have prolonged mourning rituals.

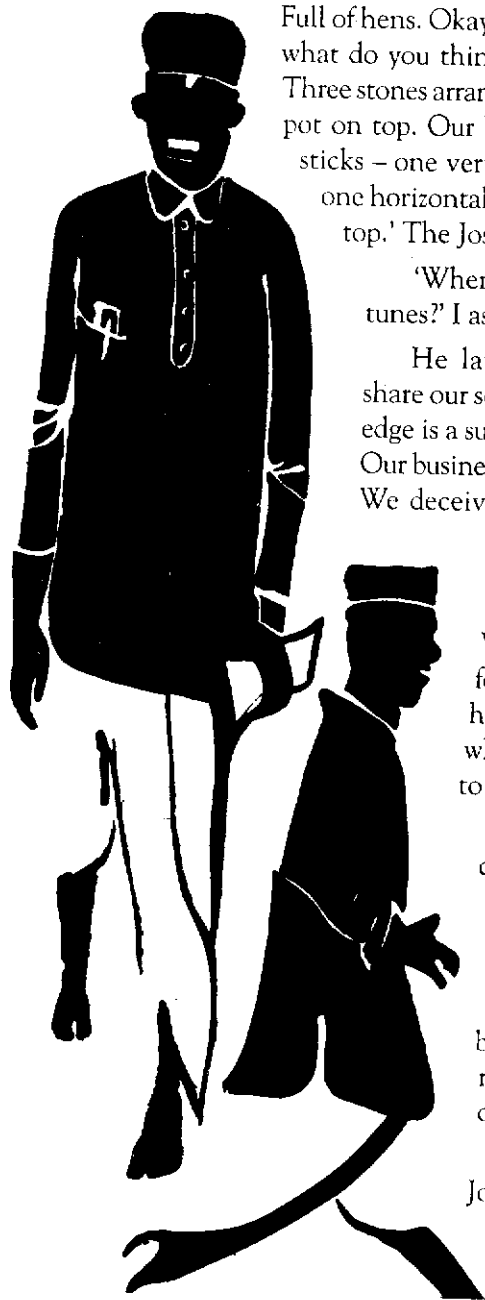
Addiction to alcohol is a great problem among the community, as it is among other nomadic tribes. Rajubai Tamkhane, a woman from the Bhoi community told me, 'Our men lie around drunk. Women have to take their fish baskets on their heads, and go to the market, with one child in their arms and one child at their breast. Due to this, even the 10-15 year old boys at home drink. Even their teachers drink. When a Bhoi father comes home drunk at night, he beats his children and throws out their books. The Bhoi children cannot be educated unless they are separated from their fathers.'

Bhois are rough in their speech. Narayandev said, 'Earlier we were very friendly with the dalits, but nowadays we are enemies. Brahmin priests will not perform our marriage ceremonies. We are derided as being dark and ugly. But the beautiful Matsyagandha came from our caste, and you stole her away. If you take away the best amongst us, of course we will remain dark and ugly.'



Just as there are many nomadic tribes earning their livelihood by practising one or the other skill, there are also some that survive by begging. Each tribe's style of begging has its own peculiarities. For hundreds of years these tribes have clung to their languages, specific musical instruments and peculiar methods of conning people.

The Joshi tribe is one roving community that lives off the income earned from fortune-telling, and the trade has made them very smooth talkers. They can string words together expertly. When asked what are the items that are part of his ever-moving home, a Joshi told me, 'A donkey or a horse. A gunny bag on its back. A sack on top of that. A small cot over that. Baskets tied to the side.



Full of hens. Okay, when we stop somewhere, what do you think our household contains? Three stones arranged as a *chulha*. An earthen pot on top. Our huts are nothing but three sticks – one vertical, another diagonal and one horizontal – with a tarpaulin sheet on top.' The Joshi began his spiel.

'Where did you learn to tell fortunes?' I asked.

He laughed and said, 'Let me share our secret with you. Our knowledge is a sum of logic and experience. Our business is nothing but deception. We deceive through language, dress and external appearance.

We start off by looking at the client and his face. What is true for me is true for my client as well. From his face, we can know whether what we say applies to the client.

'Once we know that the client is getting convinced, we are unstoppable. If we make ten predictions, of which only two are correct, the client remembers those and forgets the remaining eight incorrect ones.'

Vitthalrao Bhosle, a Joshi, has a bicycle shop in the Ganeshkhind area of Pune. A man in his sixties, with a promi-

nent *tila* (red mark) on his forehead and a string of beads round his neck, he is a member of the Association of Nomadic Tribes and chairman of the local Congress ward office. He resides in Premnagar, a slum with a predominantly nomadic tribal population. He told me, 'As a young man, I wandered all over and earned my livelihood through fortune telling. I could tell the zodiac sign of a client just from his name. Each zodiac sign has some basic characteristics and I used to elaborate on them. One gets more alms in this fashion than by plain begging. There are some among us who, when they see a gullible client, frighten him by making dire predictions and seek to exploit him. But if a smart person turns up there at such a time, they may receive a thrashing.'

'Do you know of any such incident?'

'I have seen it happen in a village. A Joshi visiting a village went to the shop of a Marwari. His wife was there. She had one son, who was out of the house. Once the Joshi got this information out of her, he scared her by telling her that her son would die within a week. Once she was properly frightened, he said, "There is a way to avoid this. You must perform a ritual for a particular god. Get someone to perform it for you. But it must be done." Once she showed her readiness to do the needful, he said, "But it must be done properly. If something goes wrong, it will be a problem." "Why don't you perform it yourself," the frightened woman suggested. "Take as much money as you want." A mild-looking man had been listening to all this for some time. He got up and said, "I am going to tie you to this pole now. If the son of this woman dies in the next week, I will turn over all her wealth to you, but if he doesn't, I will flog you." The Joshi pleaded with him. But the man tied him to the pole and flogged him with a whip.'

While narrating the 'business tricks' of this tribe, Vitthalrao told me, 'During my wanderings as a young man, I observed that people give alms generously to *fakirs*. I tied a kerchief round my head in the style of a *fakir*, got hold of a small wooden shovel, tied a satchel to one end of the shovel and started begging. "I am going to Sadalbaba's tomb. If you have promised him anything, please tell me so that I can give it to him on your behalf." Saying this, I

would collect grain from people. After I got married, my wife and I would tell people, "Both of us come from respectable families, but we have made a vow to God that we shall beg our way to Tuljapur. Now we are redeeming that vow," People would invite us to their homes and feed us well. I had devised a special trick that I used when I went to such a house for a meal. I would give a gentle push to the shovel on my shoulder to make the satchel fall off. "I have been begging for so many years but never before has my satchel fallen on the ground in anybody's house. Since it has fallen in your house, I must tell you this is a good omen. It appears that God wants your wishes to come true. So do something for God! Be generous and give me something." They would then give me something valuable, and some money to perform rituals for God.'

'Which route did you follow in your wanderings?'

'I used to buy bulls from Daund and Baramati and sell them in the Konkan region. We used to avoid the highways. All the towns on the Mumbai-Pune road are market towns, where people don't give alms. They won't even allow you to stand at the door. We would take by-roads and pass through villages. People in such villages are usually simple and always give alms in the name of God. Besides, we have our animals with us and they can graze on the pastures. When there was no grass, we could say, "Give these animals four bundles of straw to eat," and people would give at least two bundles, if not four. This could never happen in a market town. Nowadays, even people in villages tell us, "You are fit and healthy. Why don't you work?" and we have to listen to this in silence.'

Since the Joshis live by begging, occasionally their women sometimes get into difficult situations. This is an incident that occurred some years ago in a village near Rahuri: A Joshi who had set up camp in this village would tour the neighbouring villages to tell fortunes. Sometimes, he would be away for two to three days at a time. Sonabai, his wife, would do whatever labour work she could get. Two wealthy young farmers spotted her and one day just picked her up, carried her to their isolated farmhouse, and raped her. Hearing her screams, passers-by began to bang on the door, but the rapists did not relent. This went on through the afternoon and the

night. In the morning, people went to the mother of one of the young farmers and informed her. The mother, along with her daughter-in-law, went to the farmhouse and banged on the door. The rapist came out naked before his mother. His wife averted her face and walked off. Cursing him, the mother freed Sonabai. When the Joshi returned, he learnt what had happened. 'But what is the point of confronting those local bullies?' He quietly dismantled his temporary hut and left the village along with his wife.

The shocking thing was that both the rapists were Neo-Buddhist *dalits* themselves.

The Joshi community has its own *Jati Panchayat*, or caste council, which is held in the Pandharpur mango orchard, after the annual *Kartiki Ekadashi* and continues till the next full moon. The *Jati Panchayat* of each village holds its sessions under the same tree year after year. If people from a particular village do not turn up for the *Jati Panchayat*, a message is sent, warning them that their tree may be given to others if they do not turn up the following year as well. In addition to this, a *Jati Panchayat* is held in a village whenever a dispute arises.

Vitthalrao Bhosle is a respected *panch* within his caste. He told me, 'Wherever there is a session of our *Jati Panchayat*, I receive a letter informing me of it. Once I go there to settle the dispute, I am supposed to sit in session until the judgement is delivered. Sometimes the final verdict takes not just two days, but even as long as a week. I earn nothing from this. I am lucky if I get the fare for the journey. Because of this free work, I end up neglecting my business. Then my wife yells at me.'

'To what extent are the *Jati Panchayat's* proceedings influenced by the wealth and power of the involved parties?'

'Not at all, because the *panchas* come from all over. Influence of this kind is not possible. A man is dubbed cantankerous if he goes on taking his grievance from one *Jati Panchayat* to another. If a man disagrees with our verdict, we ask him to take an oath before the Somaya spring near Baramati. He does so at his own risk, and we take this in writing from him; else if a man suffers the evil consequences of a false oath, people may blame us for "pushing

him towards God." At the spring, he is made to fetch water from the well and offer it to Lord Somaya. If the man is guilty, he sees a cobra in the well and runs out screaming. An accident is sure to befall a person's family if he persists and gives false testimony.'

I met Gachkeshwar, an educated man hailing from the Joshi community, in the *zatra* at Madhi. He narrated to me the custom of the twelve-course meal called the *Barathal Vaan*, observed in the marriage ceremonies of the Joshis. 'The special festive meal requires *jalebis*, *laddus*, *pedhas*, *burfis*, *charoli*, *godambi* (traditional sweet-meats), dried dates, sweetened sesame seeds, dried coconuts, almonds, cashews, and pistachios to be served. Only married people are invited to this ritual feast. Those who are excommunicated from the caste are not invited. A person who has attended the funeral of an excommunicated person is also excluded.'

Gotral, another young man, told me, 'At times, after so much has been spent on arranging the feast, some respected but cantankerous men rake up some old fault of the host as they sit down to eat, like accusing him of having flouted some caste rule. A big scene follows and all the guests leave the venue without eating. All the food is wasted. Besides, the host gets a bad name.'

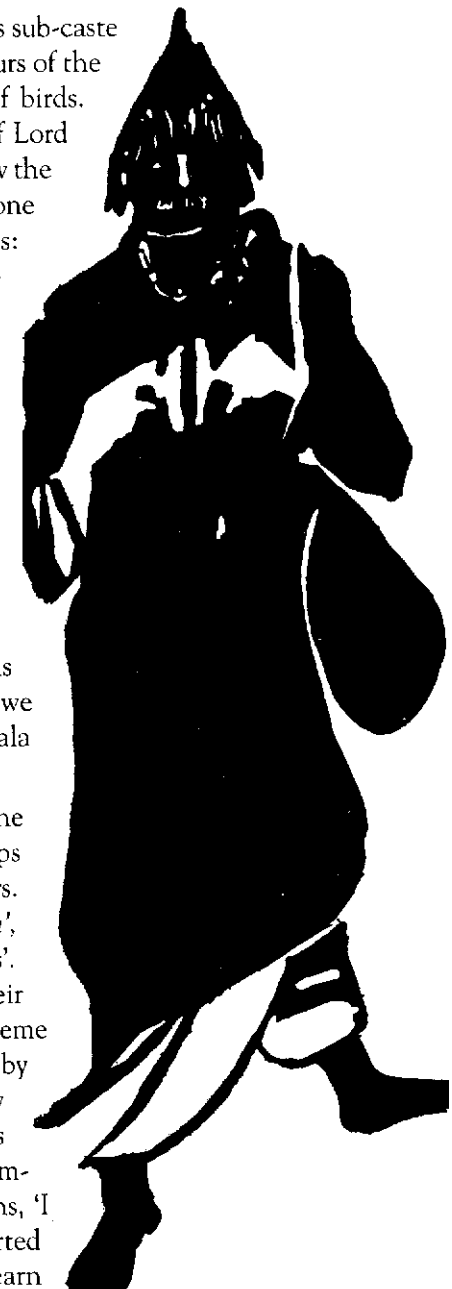
In the city of Pune, the Joshi community is concentrated in the locality called Ghorpade Peth. The women of this community go from house to house and collect worn-out and old clothes, which are then mended by the men at home and sold to traders in the secondhand market. Joshis living in Hadapsar sit in front of laundries and repair clothes. Women stitch quilts. 'How did your caste get into this tailoring work?' I asked some Joshis.

'In our wanderings, our women used to sell needles to village folk, where these things were not available. They also used to stitch quilts for the villagers. We just stuck to these trades when we settled in cities. Besides, who will believe in our prophecies and fortune-telling in the city?'

Medhangi is a large sub-caste among the Joshis. Palmistry is their *forte*. Kudmude is another sub-caste. They beat the *damroo* (a kind of drum) through villages at dawn. They consult the traditional almanac for predicting the fortunes of their clients. Pingala

is the third sub-caste. Men of this sub-caste sit on the treetops in the wee hours of the morning and mimic the calls of birds. They also sing songs in praise of Lord Kanifnath. A Pingala told me how the mimicking of bird calls became one of the customs of the Pingalas: 'People in a particular village believed that the hooting of an owl (*pingala*) was auspicious and made generous offerings of grain and money under the tree where the bird hooted. One of us saw this and spread a sheet of cloth under the tree and climbed on to it. He began to mimic the call and later came down and collected the offerings; this became his livelihood. From then on, this became one of our customs and we even came to be known as Pingala Joshis.'

The fourth kind of Joshi is the Vasudev Joshi. They wear caps decorated with peacock feathers. Their begging call is '*dan pavala*', meaning they have 'received alms'. They carry a flute tucked in their waistbands and play a musical theme in a peculiar style, punctuated by their call. Vasudev Joshis usually wander along the banks of rivers and call out to those who are coming out after finishing their baths, 'I shall sing in praise of your departed forefathers before God.' They earn quite well in this fashion.



Chitrakathi is another group; they are few in number. Chitrakathis carry numerous old pictures depicting themes from the epic Ramayana. Pointing a finger at each of them, they narrate stories from the epic. The storyteller always has a companion and the two soon start a dialogue. Sometimes, the narrator acts as Sita and sometimes the companion assumes that role. Stories from the Ramayana are used just as a base; the rest of the stories are the narrator's creations. Some Chitrakathi Joshis wear *dhotis* at night, and using burning torches, perform a kind of 'shadow-play'.

This community follows extremely rigid caste norms and gives great importance to the institution of the *Jati Panchayat*. Daulatrao Bhosale, the executive secretary of the Nomadic Tribes Association is from the Chitrakathi community. He narrated to me an episode he had witnessed as a child in Kolhapur at one of the caste councils of his community. 'A norm rigidly followed among the Chitrakathis is that the woman of the house must return to her home before nightfall. She is considered corrupt if she spends her night outside her home. Once a woman was delayed and could not reach her home before 7.30–8.00 p.m. The issue was referred to the *Jati Panchayat*. "When can the night be said to have begun?" was the issue hotly debated for three to four days. Finally, the *Jati Panchayat* declared the woman to be of loose virtue and excommunicated her.'

The Gondhali sub-caste is familiar to most people. Farmers call its members for marriage ceremonies and on specific days of the year 'to make *Gondhal*' (revelry sessions). Gondhalis are devotees of Devi. They always carry a *Sambal* (a percussion instrument played with sticks). Their special performance is a kind of 'name-guessing' through elaborate gestures made by one Gondhali to another. Two Gondhalis stand about a hundred feet apart. One of them is told the name of a person in the household. This is communicated by gestures alone to his partner. Once the name is deciphered, the Gondhalis invoke that name, singing in praise of God. The gestures by which they communicate are predetermined. A salute means the name is Ramrao; when the hand goes around the neck, signifying a necklace, the name is Sarubai; if the first letter of the name is 'Ka', that is signified by raising the little finger; and

the motion of slashing with a sword is the letter 'Kha'; pointing at the sky means 'Ga'; 'Gha' is signified by shaping the hands like a pot – and so on and so forth.

'The Gondhalis, Chirtakathis, and Vasudevs among the Joshi clans can intermarry; such marriages have taken place. However, each of these sub-castes has its own *Jati Panchayat*,' said Vitthalrao.

There is a settlement of Davari Gosavis belonging to the Nath order at Hadapsar. These Gosavis ask for alms by playing the *Davari*. A man took a *Davari* from a vessel and showed it to me. It was shaped like a small measure used for grain called the *aathawa* and covered with skin on both sides. It is played with the fingers like a stringed instrument. 'Our caste survives because of this *davari*. Without the *davari*, there is no difference between us and other folk. Nobody else will play this instrument,' said the man.

I paid a visit to Varnan Ramachandra Sawant of Hadapsar and everybody gathered around. A man named Arjun described the huts built by the Davaris: 'A piece of tarpaulin or cloth is fixed over two horizontal bamboo poles, and then half a dozen pegs are driven into the ground on each side, tightening the tarpaulin. When it rains, it initially soaks the cloth on the roof, but thereafter the water just flows down on to the ground. We dig trenches to allow the water to drain away. However, we are totally helpless against the wind. If a strong wind blows through the hut, it is destroyed. So we choose the location carefully. We build our huts on a slight elevation with a lot of gravel in the soil, so that the rainwater can drain off completely.'

For some years now, the Davaris have entered into the buffalo trade. A buffalo that has just conceived is available cheap, but the same animal fetches a good price when it is about to deliver. Davaris tend these animals in the intervening period, for a sum of fifteen rupees per month, and then return the animals to the owners just before they deliver. Else, they buy a one-month pregnant buffalo from the market and sell her just before she gives birth. Davaris move from one village to another. They graze their cattle on government land – which costs them nothing – but this means that they must always be on the move. Davaris know the 'ins' and 'outs'

of buffalo rearing. They apply *Karanji* oil on the buffaloes' backs, in order to prevent mosquito and fly bites. They drape quilts over the creatures' backs, and also light grass fires near them to drive off the mosquitoes.

Buffaloes now cost more than two thousand rupees. The Davaris do not have enough capital to trade in more than one buffalo at a time. In accordance with rules, banks do not give them loans for buffaloes as they do not own any land as surety. 'If we had enough land, would we wander from one place to another?' a Davari asked a bank manager. These people are then forced to raise loans from farmers. Some farmers in Hadapsar have prospered through usury among the Davaris. At the start of the year, they advance a thousand rupees to buy a buffalo and collect fourteen hundred rupees at the end of the year. Besides, they claim half the profit made by the Davari on the sale of the buffalo; the dung of the animal also goes to the farmer.

Davaris travel from Miraj-Satara towards Pune and then towards Mumbai, and return by the same route. They camp on open land near Hadapsar for about a month and then go to the Yerawada grounds, which are on the Alandi road. From there they travel along the Charholi-Dehu road towards Wadgaon-Maval. These are their regular camping sites. Each group has its designated route and different villages are assigned to each of them. This is not their village, but when they reach there on the eve of *Dussehra*, they are given the privilege of guarding the festive *ghat*, an earthen pot, for the entire nine days of the festival. The village people give them grain and money for performing this duty and for singing devotional songs to the goddess. Or, they are given a few hundred rupees collected from the entire village.

The *Jati Panchayat* or caste council is held at the *zatra* of Bhairavnath, in the village of Dharampuri in Parunda taluka, on the tenth day after the full moon of *Chaitra* (around April). The rules of the *Jati Panchayat* are fixed, and are written on a kind of papyrus. If a man marries his brother's wife, he has to pay a fine of Rs.350; if he marries his wife's sister, he has to pay Rs.60. After payment of the fine, the caste accepts such marriages. A person

who is guilty of stealing is fined Rs.48 and a person who breaks the teeth of another in a fight has to pay Rs.32 as fine. The amount of the fine is fixed and has not changed over the years.

If a man keeps a concubine who does not belong to his caste, then he is fined Rs.80. The man usually postpones the payment of this fine as long as he can afford to. But when he has children from the relationship, their marriages (in the future) become a matter of concern for him, and then he relents and pays up. The caste council gathers and the man is asked to pay a fine of Rs.350. Holy ash is then put in the mouth of the concubine, sanctioning her formal entry into the caste fold. But what about the children? Such children are considered illegitimate until the *Patil* or caste chief adopts them. The father of such children then pays a sum of fifty rupees per child and buys them back from the *Patil*. When this is done, the children become acceptable for marriage within the community. These days, some Davaris have made a permanent settlement in a slum near Hadapsar. Some of them are in the buffalo trade. Since there is irrigated farmland all around, there is plenty of water and grass. Some roam through Pune city and trade in waste paper. Arjun does this and he told me the secret of his trade:

'Even twenty rupees is capital enough for this trade. You go from house to house on a bicycle, collect old newspapers from people and sell them to big shops. You cheat a little while weighing the newspapers. This way you make a hundred grams extra paper per kilo. People who do this trade travel as far as Pimpri and Chinchawad on cycles. Some of us even load our cycles in trucks and go up to Lonavala.'



Wadapuri village is situated near Indapur in Pune district. A hill-ock near this village is the venue for the *zatra* of the Tirumallis, a sub-caste of the Nandiwalas or bull-keepers. This *zatra* is held every three years and at this time about three hundred temporary huts come up in the area. Hundreds of pigs are slaughtered before 'Rammama', the deity of the Tirumallis, during the *zatra*. Traders bring truckloads of pigs to Wadapuri on the occasion. A pig, a bottle of liquor and a bundle of *bidis* are placed before Rammama.

Large amounts of liquor are sold during the *zatra*. Caste *Jati Panchayats* are held.

The Tirumallis are a small community, with a population not exceeding two thousand five hundred. Any Tirumalli marrying outside his community is excommunicated by the caste council. This makes the issue of marriage very complicated. A young man holds his infant bride in his arms on his marriage day, while a thirty-five year old woman may be seen marrying a twelve-year old boy. Marriages with close relatives are also quite common, yet the congenital defects and physical deformities among them are considerably less than among the Parsis, which is quite surprising.



With a decorated bull, Tirumallis roam from village to village asking for foodgrains and old clothes. Their territories (which they call *Watans*), within which they can ask for alms, are well-defined. Many of these 'bull people' lend money to farmers, from whom they do not recover the principal, but just collect the interest from year to year. If a farmer refuses to pay his dues, then these Nandiwalas throng before the house of the defaulter and make a big ruckus by beating their drums. Farmers are terribly afraid of this ignominy and pay up the debt.

Nandiwalas also indulge in the money-lending business within their own community on a large scale. Those who have more capital buy many bulls, train them and then hire them out to other Nandiwalas at a high rent. This has made a few of the Nandiwala Patils quite prosperous. One of them has even settled in a place and bought some land, where he forces Nandiwalas in his debt to send their families to work as bonded labourers for years on end. Like the Vaidus, they are fond of hunting. I once visited the huts of some Nandiwalas who were camping near Saswad. As I approached the settlement, I was greeted by the howling of about 200 dogs coming from 30 to 40 huts. A hunter came along, with a skinned rabbit tied to the tip of his spear, and fastened it on top of a long bamboo pole in front of his hut to keep it out of reach of the canines. Since three to four men had hunted it together, they would each get only a small share after it was divided amongst them.

A farmer from Saswad told me about a Nandiwala hunt he had witnessed a year or two earlier: 'They were chasing a porcupine in the hills. Porcupines live in burrows so big that a crawling man can enter them and each such burrow has many outlets. On that particular day, two very young boys and an old man chased the animal to its burrow. They plugged all the outlets, except one, with mud and stones. Then they burned dried chilies and other things in front of the open hole and let the smoke flood the burrow. After some time, one of the youths entered the hole and brought out a dead porcupine. He entered the hole once again hoping to find a few more. He did not return for long, so the other young boy went in. He too did not return for a long time. Finally, the old man waiting

outside the hole went to a strange village and brought some men from his community along with him the next morning. These men first unplugged the holes and out came the poisonous gas. They then pulled out the corpses of the two boys.'

Among the Nandiwalas, all men, including boys and old men, shave off their hair except for a tuft on the top of their scalps. A small ring in the ear indicates that the man is married. A man puts an earring in his son-in-law's ear at the time of the marriage. In this settlement, I could see everyone, including six and seven year old children, wearing those earrings.

'Are the Dhavale Nandiwalas one of the sub-castes of your community?' I asked one of the Tirumala Nandiwalas.

'No, no! They are Muslims. We have absolutely no relationship with them,' one young man said.

'No, they are Hindus,' I said.

'They may say so, but the fact is that they are Muslims.'

Notwithstanding what Tirumallis may say, the Dhavale Nandiwalas are a sub-caste of the Nandiwalas. These people perform stunts, like making a bull stand on their bare chests. They also tell fortunes. Their rules regarding women are extremely oppressive. They never take them for their Nandi shows. The women must stay back in their huts. Shashikala Waikar, a young woman from the Dhavale Nandiwala settlement on the Hadapsar plain told me, 'If a woman has illicit relations with another man, the *Jati Panchayat* turns her fate into something resembling the fate of the castor plant. You know, the castor plant becomes completely hollow from inside when it is rotten and only its thin outer shell remains. The woman who goes astray meets a similar fate.'

Bhandivala Nandiwala is the third sub-caste of the Nandiwalas. Earlier, they used to move around with their bulls. Of late, they collect used utensils from people and, in return, give them new ones. They too camp near Hadapsar. They told me that they no longer travel on foot, but use state transport buses instead. They load their belongings on the rooftops of the buses. Bulls are no longer of much use to them.

Along the western side of the settlement of this sub-caste, one can see flags of the deities which protect them. Their huts face eastwards, and while sleeping, they strictly follow the rule of keeping their heads westward, as their gods abide in this direction. Their gods are in the form of wooden dolls or round pebbles and stamped icons, depicting their forefathers. They are placed inside the hut in a satchel hanging from the roof.

They celebrate a festival called *Aakhadam* in the month of *Aashaad* (July), during which they sacrifice goats before the god called Shivadartalli. Each family slaughters one to four goats at a time. In the olden days, these people used to slaughter the sacrificial goats themselves, because of which the Marathas scoffed at them. To avoid this, they now call Muslims to do the slaughtering job. The blood of the goat is spilled on the god (a stone coated with vermilion powder), before the ceremonial offering is made to it. On the second Sunday following *Aakhadam*, they go to the river and fish out a smooth elongated stone from it. This stone is placed on the bank of the river and twigs of the *Karanji* tree are planted around it. This stone is now worshiped. This is again a time for goat or cock sacrifice. However, Savadtalli and Wagultalli are two of their gods who have to be propitiated by offerings of sweets.

In this sub-caste, a dowry of anything between four hundred to two thousand rupees is given to the bride. To save on this dowry, the community resorts to marriages within the family (giving away one's sister in marriage to the brother of one's wife). A maternal uncle may marry his niece.

This community is about twenty five thousand strong, out of which sixty boys and three girls have made it to the matriculation grade. Fifteen men have become graduates. Kisan Pawar, a young man from this community, is working as a storekeeper in the Sassoon Hospital. He, along with his educated friends, is trying to reform his community. As part of this agenda, they announced a prize of Rs 101 to people who showed the willingness to make a collective goat sacrifice, rather than an individual one. However, nobody from the community has taken up this offer. One of the

utensil traders from this community is a member of the *Gram Panchayat* somewhere in Karmala taluka. 'He is the richest man among us. Of course, a rich man from among us would just about be middle-class among people like you,' said Kisan Pawar.



The villages of Maharashtra have a number of hermitages belonging to Gosavis. The Somwar Peth locality of Pune has one such hermitage, because of which the locality is known as 'Gosavipura'. 'Baba Gosavi' is one of the sub-castes of the Gosavis. Clad in saffron and carrying iron tongs in one hand, and a *Kamandalu*, (a vessel for carrying water) and a bowl to collect alms in the other, they walk around begging, chanting the invocation '*Alakh*'. These hermits or Gosavis never accept cooked food as alms; instead, they take only flour or grain. Everyone, children and women included, consumes *bhang* on the day of Mahashivratri (an important Hindu festival in honour of the lord Shiva). Giri, Puri, Bharati, Jatti, Bun and Sagar are some of the surnames among the Gosavis.

They worship the goddess Hingulan Devi of Nepal. Every Gosavi is expected to make a pilgrimage to her shrine in Nepal at least once in his lifetime. Gosavis are initiated into the path of asceticism once they visit the temple of this goddess.

Giri, an educated Gosavi said, 'In earlier times, Gosavis were not allowed to marry because the moment the Gosavi was initiated by his master as a disciple, he belonged to the Gosavi community. During the Peshwa regime, Gosavis enjoyed great prestige. The Peshwa appointed a Gosavi as his spiritual master and to show reverence, removed his footwear and walked barefooted when entering Gosavipura in Somwar Peth. It was during this very period that bad conduct increased among the Gosavis. Almost each one had an affair with a number of women. Then they all got together and gave each other permission to enter into matrimony. From this time onward, Gosavis became a caste just like any other.'

Since the custom of matrimony is a recent introduction in their lives and since they were in contact with the upper classes of mainstream society, the Gosavis follow customs of marriage quite

distinct from those of other nomadic tribes. The father of the bride gives a dowry to the bridegroom. If the groom is educated, this would be about four thousand rupees.



Baba Gosavis are buried after death in the vicinity of the hermitage itself. When a Gosavi dies, he is stripped of all his clothes, however rich or educated he might have been. Then his body is covered with saffron clothes. A begging satchel is also slung around his arm, with a *Kamandalu* kept by his side. He is buried with his body in a sitting posture. Depending upon the economic status, a tomb is then built at the place of burial.

Gosavis do not have the institution of a *Jati Panchayat* like the other nomadic tribes do. But in an effort to organize this sub-caste, the educated men among this community have decided to come together and form committees in each district.

The life of the Gosavis who survive on begging in the villages is full of hardship. Uttam Gosavi is a young man of this sub-caste who lives in Yewale, a village about twenty miles from Jalna. Two Maratha labourers coveted his wife. When he confronted them over the issue, the two men collected a few more of their own people, caught Uttam, tied him with a piece of rope, dumped him in a bullock cart and took him to the woods in broad daylight. There they cut off his right hand and his 'chattering' tongue. The entire village knew why Uttam was being taken away, but none of the villagers offered any resistance to those goons.

I had an opportunity to witness the poverty of Uttam's home. After meeting him in the hospital at Jalna, I went to his village to meet his wife. A boy showed me his house and entered into it to call out Uttam's wife. He came out instantly and told me to wait. Uttam's wife had only one *saree* to cover herself with and she had washed that and hung it out for drying. Since she had no spare *saree* to wear, she was sitting naked inside the house. The boy then took the tattered *saree* from the clothesline, went inside and gave it to her. After some time, the woman came out to meet us with downcast eyes.

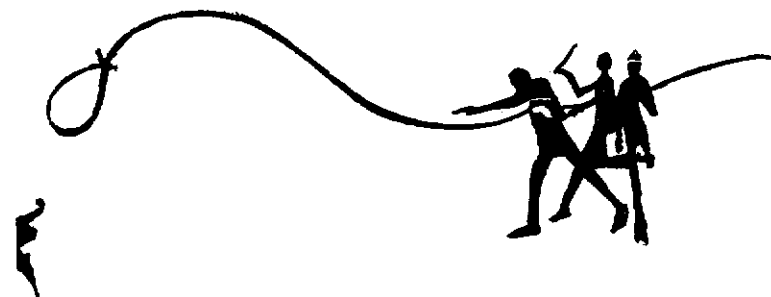


There is at least some education and progress among the Gosavis, but the Jogi community is extremely backward. Nath Jogis and,

even more than them, Masan Jogis are out of the mainstream of modern life.

Dinkar Rawal, a man from Sangamner, told me some of the customs of Nath Jogis. These people are seen carrying dancing bells, a *kamandalu* and a trident. Dressed in saffron, they ask for alms with the call '*Alakh Niranjan*' (the name of Lord Shiva). No matter how rich the man is, on some appointed days he must go to five houses and beg. A Nath Jogi gets a ritual burial and on the twelfth day after his death, a goat is sacrificed. If a couple is unable to beget children, they make a covenant with the god that they will dedicate their firstborn son to the Lord at Parali Vajinath. This child is then given away to serve the priest at this religious centre. He must go wherever ordered – to any part of India – and don saffron clothes and beg. Nath Jogis value their golden earrings and take great care of them. If one of his earrings falls to the ground accidentally, the Nath Jogi is buried alive.

Masan Jogi is one community that is even further removed from mainstream society. They have a very horrifying external appearance, the result of not bathing for months on end and not shaving for years. A Masan Jogi wears a pair of horns on his head and never enters a village. He lives in the Hindu cremation grounds. He extorts money from the people who bring dead bodies for cremation. This extortion is considered to be his customary right. Masan Jogis ransack the ashes of the dead body to look for any golden teeth that the dead person might have had. They live by



the art of black magic or *Bhanamati*, as it is called. When the rich and powerful of the village become desperate to have an heir or lay their hands on some secret treasure, they consult a Masan Jogi for the fulfillment of their wishes. He then tells them to get a variety of weird things like a piece from the *saree* worn by a woman who has died in childbirth, or the skull of a boy who has died within five days of birth, after which they engage in their black rituals.



In olden times, our villages did not have any means of recreation and entertainment. Some roving tribes filled this lack by performing acrobatics and tricks in villages and earning a living in the form of food grain, etc. Now, transistors have invaded even the most remote villages and with the growth of urban centers, it is easy for a villager to reach a nearby township and go to the cinema, theatre or *tamasha*. This has considerably affected the business of these performing tribes, but not yet destroyed it entirely. Even today, the Makadwalas (monkey-keepers), snake charmers, magicians and Dombaris (a tribe which performs street acrobatics) wander through the streets of cities, display their tricks and somehow eke out a living.

We imagine that each person can perform the tricks they are capable of learning. But this is not true. There are castes that have been performing specific tricks for generations. One does not trespass into the specific area of expertise of another.



Hidden behind the tall congress (*parthenium*) grass near the railway line in Hadapsar is a locality where the Makadwalas live. As you enter the settlement, the picture that greets you is one of pigsties, branches of the *shindi* tree kept for drying, monkeys tied to trees, and womenfolk squatting in front of their huts, combing each other's hair and picking out each other's lice.

As I make my appearance, some twenty-five dark skinned people with tattered clothes, unshaven faces, bloodshot eyes and

breath smelling of liquor came out and squatted before me. As soon as I began to ask them questions, one began to speak, another interrupted him while a third became angry and abusive. Then the womenfolk barged into the discussion and started quarrelling as well. It took me a lot of effort to calm these people down, so that I could listen to them properly.

Ram Gangaram Jadhav, a man sitting directly in front of me, said, 'Originally, we were Konchikorvas. Traditionally, we used to make brooms out of *gogol* grass from the Konkan region and sell them to shepherds. They weave blankets and need brooms for their work. But now that business has collapsed. Our people then saw Muslims making money through monkey shows, so they did the same. But that did not suffice. Then we started making brooms similar to those made by the Mangs. We also entered into the tattooing trade. Even this did not give us enough for our livelihood, so we began showing "movies" at street corners with the help of "movie boxes". Some of us even entered into the candy-floss business. Finally, we began to rear pigs. All these trades are practised by our people today and you will find someone or the other in the family making money out of each one of these trades.'

About the capital for the trade, he said: 'There is a man in the camp area who makes "movie boxes" for us and charges three to four hundred rupees a piece. The candy-floss machine costs about three hundred and fifty rupees. Monkeys can be purchased in Mumbai and Nasik. A young monkey costs about twenty rupees.'

'And how do they catch the monkeys?'

'The young one of a monkey always clings to its mother's belly. If you chase the mother with a stick in hand, she throws the baby aside and runs away. We then lift the creature, bring it home and rear it the way we rear a human child. Our method of teaching the baby monkey is to pet it if it does as it is told. If it refuses, we give it a whack.'

'How much do you earn per day?'

'It's all very uncertain. Either it is a jackpot or an empty begging bowl,' replied the man nonchalantly.

A man brought a candy-floss machine to show me. It was a simple device with a stove and a hollow tin ball that could be rotated with the help of a handle. This tin sphere had an opening at the top through which sugar and colour are added. The stove below it melts the sugar and the rotating ball produces floss that oozes out of the opening.

'How far do you travel to sell this candy floss?'

'We take our cycle and go as far as Yerawada, Lohagaon, and Dehu Road – all over Pune. Business is very slack during the monsoons. Besides, it is difficult to move around. The candy-floss too becomes damp due to the humid climate.'

Then we talked about the marriage customs of the Makadwalas. Yellappa Jadhav, a man in his late sixties with a bushy grey moustache, was also sitting in front of me. He held in his lap a baby boy of about a year and a half wearing a cap. 'What is the marriage age in your community?' I wanted to know. The man smiled mischievously into his moustache, and pointing to the baby in his lap, said, 'His marriage has already been fixed.' Then he continued, 'In our caste, the boy pays money to the girl and asks her hand in marriage. That is why, whenever a girl is born in the community, the parents of boys flock to her house and ask for her hand for their sons. The marriage is decided in the presence of four witnesses who are then given liquor. Then the boy's father takes the girl's father to a grocer's shop and buys a few kilos of food grains for him. This seals the matrimonial contract. Gifts are exchanged between the two parties according to their economic capacity and willingness. This man got a bride for his son for a mere *bidi*,' he said, pointing to one of the men sitting on the floor.

'Which means that all those in this locality must be married?' I asked.

'Of course. We do not have a single unmarried child with us. Look, here comes our son-in-law,' the man said.

A boy of about four years with a running nose stood before me. He blushed as we looked at him with a smile.

'What do you do if someone tries to wriggle out of a child marriage fixed earlier?'

'How can he refuse? The caste will force it upon him.'

As we were discussing the marriage customs, one of them said, 'We are supposed to give a sum of twenty rupees to the father of the girl. However, for the first three daughters the money goes to their maternal uncle.'

I spotted a group of young boys with cloth bands tied around their foreheads in the manner of dacoits. When asked whether this was some kind of fashion, Yellappa said, 'Those boys have been bequeathed to God. That boy has been give to Mariaai, the other one to Satwai, the third one to Mhasoba. Some of these boys get possessed on Sundays, some on Tuesdays and still others on Thursdays. When they are possessed, they are capable of exorcising the evil spirit from anyone. Since they are God's vehicles, they are supposed to follow a strict spiritual discipline. They are not allowed to cut their hair. These hair bands are necessary, otherwise the locks of hair will fall over their eyes.'

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Madaris are people who survive by performing magic shows and snake tricks in villages, as well as in front of public gardens in cities and railway stations. There is a hillock near Hadapsar called Ramtekdi. About a dozen huts belonging to this tribe can be seen at the foot of this hillock.

Madaris here are Muslims. They hail from Karmala. They had arrived there a month back and were about to go towards Mumbai. Hasan Madari told me, 'The monsoons in Mumbai are very heavy, so we spend that season here. We go to Mumbai soon after Diwali. Some of us go to the Konkan region during Diwali as it is the harvesting season there. Some go to Satara in winter and earn money by harvesting *shalu*, a kind of coarse grain. Our women go to work in the fields during the farming season and we earn a livelihood by performing magic tricks.'

Then Hasan led me into his hut, which was constructed of cloth stretched over a semi-circular skeleton of bamboo poles. I saw trenches for drainage dug on three sides of the hut. Then half a dozen young men gathered there. All of them had fair skin and light eyes, and wore fur caps typical of Muslims.

I asked Hasan his trade secret. He said, 'Saheb, we cannot perform magic. We simply indulge in sleight of hand. What your Raghuvir does in the auditorium, we perform the same at street corners. Look at this.' He then picked up a stick that was lying on the floor, moved it in a circle over some pieces of paper that he held in his clenched fist. When he opened the fist, I could see a neatly folded currency note. Hasan said, 'This is nothing but trickery. If we could really make a currency note out of pieces of paper, then why would we come here after undertaking the arduous journey from Karmala?'

Then we started discussing cobras. I wanted to know how Hasan and his people catch these deadly creatures. 'We start chasing the creature the moment we spot it. Sometimes, cobras enter into farms, then farmers send for us because no labourer dares to enter a field if he knows that a cobra is lurking around. We go armed with forked bamboo sticks, which act like tongs, and track down their burrows. Then we insert the forked stick into the hole where the creature is suspected to be hiding and poke it in. If the end of the tongs hits upon something soft, my hand gets the sensation. Then we whisk out the snake from that hole and let it crawl for a short distance so that we can catch hold of it by its tail. At the same time, with the stick in the other hand, we pin its neck to the ground. Then we catch hold of the snake by its mouth, lift it up and carry it home with outstretched arms. Once its jaw is forced open, the poisonous teeth of the snake are exposed. Another man, ready with a razor, slices off the venomous tooth and its adjoining part. That is the end of it. We dig a hole and bury the poisonous tooth, lest it kill anyone coming into contact with it.'

A farmer from Hadapsar who accompanied me, told us, 'The other day I saw a cobra running along a dry trench. We tried to catch it, but were unsuccessful. Finally, a Madari boy came on the

scene, dived straight down on the snake and caught hold of it by its mouth.'

'Why don't you bring out our cobras so that this Saheb can have a look at them?' Hasan said.

The boys obliged and brought a few baskets and placed them right in front of me, as if serving their guest with plates of fruits. They took the lids off each one of them and blew at the cobras coiled inside. About half a dozen cobras started hissing at us, swaying their raised hoods. Hasan brought his hand in front of the snakes and they tried to attack him with their raised hoods. He started praising his pets. 'This one is from Rajasthan, this one from Saurashtra, and this cobra comes from here itself,' Hasan showed off his cobras. Their black, yellow and greenish colours and their huge scales were enough to frighten the farmer who accompanied me. He became restive and said, 'Do cover these baskets soon.' The boys obliged and put the covers back.

'Have you ever been bitten by a cobra while trying to catch it?' I asked.

'They do bite sometimes, but if that happens, we eat herbal medicines immediately. The venom gets neutralized if it is localized, but if it spreads to the blood, the man is sure to die.'

'The cobra grows its teeth back in six months' time. Do you uproot them again?'

'No, we take them out just once. We never do it again.'

I saw a *pungi*, the traditional pipe of snake charmers, dangling from the roof. 'Is it true that the cobra sways its hood to the tune of the pipe music? I have heard that snakes have no sense of hearing.'

'Cobras sway in response to the movements of our hands. If they were able to hear, the human species would never have survived.'

I enquired about the marriage rituals among the Madaris. 'We do not indulge in give and take of any kind. Our marriages occur only within the Madari clan,' smiled Hasan.

Being Muslims, Madaris offer *namaz*. The cobra is also associated with *Navanath* or 'the nine hermits' by Hindus. So Madaris are devotees of this Hindu deity as well. They also offer their obeisance to Jyotiba, the local deity of Kolhapur.

'Suppose a Madari fails to catch a cobra, then what?' I wanted to know, as I was about to take their leave.

'You get everything in Mumbai; there is a snake market there. People sit on the roads with baskets full of cobras. You can buy a cobra for fifteen rupees,' Hasan told me.

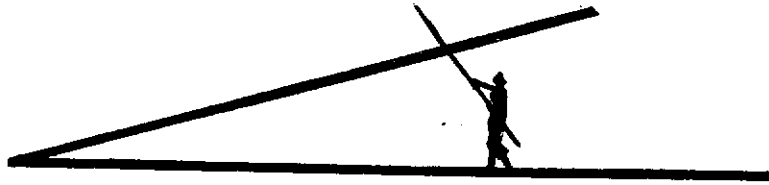


People of the Kolhati caste wander through the villages performing stunts and acrobatics. They excel in shows of physical strength like cracking boulders with their elbows alone. They keep a boulder on a child's chest and break it with blows from a huge hammer. The wives of Kolhatis do not lag behind and with their *sarees* tied up securely, and *pallu* nicely tucked around their waists, they too can be seen taking an active part in the gymnastics of their husbands. Kolhatis prefer slightly elongated and easily breakable stones. They use a special method for splitting them. While holding the stone in a slightly inclined position and putting pressure at one end with one hand, the Kolhatis ensure that the point at which they want to break it does not touch the ground. They then smash it with their elbow. This way, the stone breaks quickly. But the whole operation does leave some injuries on the hand. The Kolhatis also perform other feats. The performer lets one end of an iron bar rest on his neck, while the other end is held by his wife. She then brings forward her end of the bar slowly in such a way as to bend it in the middle. This too leaves a permanent oozing sore on the man's neck. An old Kolhati once came down to a village and performed his usual feats along with his wife and children. When it came to cracking stones with bare hands, the old man, however, just could not do it, yet he kept on hitting frenziedly at the stone. Finally, the onlookers had pity on him and persuaded him to stop trying.

In addition to the usual gymnastics, the wives of the Kolhatis support their families by selling combs made of bones. These days, acrobatics and stunts do not earn enough money for the tribe, which is why many of these people have entered into minor trades like tin-making, mending old locks, umbrellas and stoves.

Of late – for the past thirty or forty years – Kolhatis have taken a fancy to putting their girls into the dancing trade. In the local *zatrias*, Kolhatis began to put up these dancing shows under the glare of petromax lamps, since they found they could earn more this way than by doing their traditional gymnastics. This new trend has encouraged shows like the *divankhana*, in which the dancing girl is accompanied by a harmonium player, a *tabaljee* (*tabla* player) and other artistes. Spectators shower the girls with money. From this, *tamasha* shows – where Kolhati girls would sing and dance – began. The dancers soon developed the exclusive patronage of a few wealthy individuals, a few of whom began to 'own' these girls. These days, such theatres have become open dens of prostitution.

Gulab Sangamnerkar and Roshan Satarkar are some of the famous women dancers coming from the Kolhati caste. But fame has not brought money with it. Theatre owners exploit these dancers to the hilt. Half a dozen dancing girls and an equal number of accompanying artistes are paid a daily remuneration of a meager fifteen rupees each. Exuberant fans throw money at the dancing girls during the performance. This is called *Daulatjada* in theatre parlance and belongs to the dancing party. However, the amount usually does not exceed fifteen to twenty rupees per person. A dancing party which is in demand gets invitations to perform at private concerts: the remuneration there is shared fifty-fifty with the theatre owners. A part of whatever little money remains with the dancing party is again claimed by the theatre owners as dues for room rent, electricity bills and salaries of servants. The dancing girls live in impoverished and dilapidated theatres, in cramped spaces behind the stage curtain, amidst heaps of old bedding and tin trunks. The young daughters of these dancing women are also condemned to survive and grow in the lewd atmosphere of the theatre. As their mothers dance on the stage before spectators,



these young girls – sometimes just seven or eight – are seen dancing in the wings, imitating the sexy gestures of their mothers. A Kolhati girl dancing in a city usually supports her entire family living in a far-off village. Men in such dancing families become lazy and while away their time getting drunk and smoking marijuana.

By and large, the Kolhatis are divided into two sub-castes: Lakhe alias Mali and Bhatu. The dancing girls come from both these sub-castes. However, the Lakhes consider themselves born artistes. A man coming from this sub-caste once told me, 'We have nurtured the art of *tamasha* because it was our ancestral calling. But now, these Bhatu have barged in on the profession. Originally they were Dombaris. We allow marriages of our dancing girls, but once the Bhatu girl goes on the stage, she is not allowed to marry. These Bhatu do not have any moral code and hence they have made this dancing profession a façade for prostitution. Bhatu women have entered the profession of dancing much later than us and yet amassed more money than us.' Bhatu in turn talk about Lakhes in a similar vein. The division seems to be region-based, as one finds Lakhes settled in western Maharashtra and Bhatu in the Vidarbha-Marathwada region.

Like all other nomadic tribes, the Kolhatis too offer a bride-price for girls. Usually the bride-price is within the range of five to six thousand rupees. I stayed overnight with a Kolhati friend of mine. I saw about five children and some elders sleeping in his hut. After casting a glance at those children, I asked my friend, 'How many children do you have?' He pointed at a boy of nine years and said, 'That is my son.' A six year old, innocent looking

girl was also sleeping there. Pointing a finger at her, he said, 'She is my daughter-in-law.'

'Your daughter-in-law?'

'Yes. I bought her for six thousand rupees this year.'

Promissory offerings and goat sacrifices are quite common among the Kolhatis. The preferred sacrifice is a pregnant she-goat. Sometimes, they cut open the belly of the animal, remove the foetus and slaughter it before their goddess. Then a one-rupee coin with Queen Victoria's image is dipped into this blood, and a ritual mark is placed on the foreheads of those who attend the ceremony. Kolhatis perform another similar sacrificial rite: after slaughtering a pregnant goat, the unborn kid is thrown into a pit dug outside the hut. The bones of the mutton cooked on that day, along with the water used for washing the hands, are also thrown into the same pit. The Kolhatis chain their dogs before slaughtering the goat, so that they may not defile the sacrifice by sniffing it. The news of the sacrifice is kept top secret. No one, except the house where such a sacrifice takes place, knows about it. Finally, all members of the family wash their hands in the pit, which is filled up by throwing mud into it. This process is called 'filling up the ocean of the goddess'.



In our society, we come across two types of criminals, those who take to crime as a means of survival, and those who are criminals simply by virtue of belonging to a particular caste. When a person is born into one of these castes, he automatically becomes a criminal, and theft, looting, and robbery are the only means of sustenance. People born into such castes boast about the swashbuckling daredevilry of their ancestors and about how their grandfathers 'slaughtered' men in their heydays. In such castes, children are trained in criminal activities right from their early childhood. We spank our children if they fail to learn the alphabet; similarly, in the castes where crime is the way of life, children are spanked if they fail to pick a pocket or steal as taught by their elders. Even the police pick on these castes irrespective of whether they have committed a crime or not, and beat them up badly if a crime is committed in the neighbourhood. No one comes to inquire about a custodial death if the victim happens to belong to one of these castes.



Across the railway tracks at Pimpri, one can see a veritable jungle of congress grass. Hidden in this growth is a settlement, surrounded by knee-deep mud, called Bhat Nagar. There is a pond full of water right in its midst.

Moorchand Bhat, the lone graduate from the Kanjarbhat caste, lives in this locality. He is a slim, fair youth with an aquiline nose. As he was wading through the muddy lanes, women wearing traditional *ghagras* and standing behind doors cast curious glances at him. Moorchand works in one of the nearby factories and so do many other youth people from this locality. A few days earlier, a guard working in one of the factories had caught a Kanjarbhat youth stealing. Many such thefts occur in factories and the thieves belong to all castes. But because that particular incident involved a Kanjarbhat man, the word spread: 'These Kanjarbhats are born thieves, so better get rid of them.' As a result, about twenty-three Kanjarbhat youths were thrown out of their jobs. Moorchand took

up their case and made various applications and complaints seeking justice for them, but to no avail.

When I asked him, 'What is the traditional vocation of Kanjarbhats?' Moorchand told me with a straight face, 'Theft. But we have been trying to persuade our people not to indulge in it any more. The situation was looking up for us until this incident occurred.'

Whenever there is a theft in the vicinity of Pimpri, the police come straight to this locality, pick up a few individuals as per their whims, take them to the police station and give them a sound thrashing. A police sub-inspector who was recently transferred to the local police station entered the locality in plainclothes. Moorchand saw him thrashing a Kanjarbhat youth and dragging him to the police station. When he confronted him, he pounced on Moorchand and started thrashing him as well, demanding, 'How dare you not recognize me!' In the melee, the original Kanjarbhat youth ran away. This infuriated the police officer who threw Moorchand into the lock-up after thrashing him some more. Since Moorchand was known to the respectable citizens of Pimpri as a good social worker, they intervened and managed to release him from police custody.

Gannu Tamchikar, an elderly man from the Kanjarbhat caste, narrated to me the history of the caste: 'We are originally from Rajasthan. We became fugitives after the great drought of 1856. Our ancestors used to till land, but the British administration branded us as thieves. In the certificates they issued us would be our names and a list of our property including our cattle and dogs. We used to carry that certificate with us and show it to the village chief, who would count our possessions and then permit us to put up in that village for the next three days. In those days, people used to give us alms in the form of foodgrain. It was enough for us to survive. After the three days were over, the village chief would issue us a new certificate for the chief of the next village we were visiting.'

'But why that certificate?'

'So that the village chief would know if we had killed someone from our clan and buried him, or if we had stolen someone else's cattle.'

Another old man interjected: 'That is why all our festivals and programmes end within three days. Our marriage ceremony requires just three days for its completion. The first day is used to perform the ceremonial *halad*; the next day, the actual marriage is performed; and the third day is for feasting. On the fourth, we are off to a new destination. The same rule applies when somebody dies in our clan. We cremate the body the first day, collect the ashes the second and have a ceremonial feast on the third day and then again we go to the next village. The ritual mourning period that lasts up to thirteen days in most other castes is not observed by our caste. The Marathas scoff at us for this.'

'Baba, which are the places you have traveled to?' I asked Shankar Tamachikar.

He laughed and said, 'My grandfather left Jodhpur. He died under the Howrah Bridge, on the sand there. My father died in Madras. Then we arrived in Pimpri. I am going to die here.'

'Isn't it true that your people were kept locked up in compounds surrounded by barbed-wire after you were declared to be a criminal tribe by the British? I also know that there used to be a roll call a few times a day.'

'We were kept like that before the Second World War but Mahatma Gandhi freed us. But to tell you the truth, we were quite happy within the barbed-wire compound, as it meant that we no longer had to wander from one village to another. We got work in the mill as a matter of right, and always got enough to eat.'

'That may be so, but were you not compelled to seek prior permission each time you wanted to move out of the camp and were you not inconvenienced by the roll call in the middle of the night?'

'You call that inconvenience,' he retorted? 'Let me tell you that it is nothing compared to what we suffered during our wan-

dering days. Our troubles began when Gandhiji liberated us from the barbed-wire compound.'

Moorchand spoke up, 'The biggest problem of our caste is that everyone, including the women and children, is addicted to liquor. However much you explain to them, they won't listen.'

'It is true that we used to drink once upon a time but what was the liquor we used to consume? It was made out of the blossom of the *Mahua* tree. It never got anybody drunk. But your city liquor is very bad, it is very deadly,' the old man said spiritedly.

'Since when did your caste take to liquor distillation? I have seen a distillery run by a Kanjarbhat woman in Vishrantwadi in Yerawada.'

'We learnt this after we came here from the Katkaris of the Maval region. Seeing that this business thrives in the city, some of our people got into it. But such people do not have any respect within the caste.'

'In our caste, when a boy gets married, he lives separately from his family from the very next day, even if he has no source of income,' Moorchand said. 'He is expected to make his own living after he marries.'

Our discussion then settled on the subject of the *Jati Panchayat*. Moorchand said, 'Our people hold the *Jati Panchayat* in high esteem. They may never go to the police even if the crime is as grave as murder.'

'Do you recollect any such incident?'

Shankar Tamachikar pointed to Prasad Kota Tamachikar and said, 'This boy's father was murdered by his own brother.'

'Then what was the verdict of the *Jati Panchayat* in that matter?'

'The *Jati Panchayat* slapped a fine on the murderer in accordance with our tradition. There is a custom among us that when a man is killed, the murderer pays a fine of one thousand and six hundred rupees. For a woman, this amount is one thousand and two hundred rupees.'

'Was this fine paid in lumpsum?'

'No, the accused told the *Jati Panchayat* that he would not be able to pay it in one go. "I will pay it in smaller installments," he said, and took many years to pay off the entire amount.'



Near Hadapsar, at the limit of the Pune Municipal Corporation area, stands a desolate hillock called Sasanewadi. A colony of about twenty-five houses belonging to the Marwari Kumbhar caste has come up on there. The locality is about one and a half kilometers from Hadapsar. The caste is famous all over for distilling liquor.

The farmers living in the surrounding area told me, 'These poor Marwari Kumbhars do not pose any problems for us. They build their distilleries far away from the main locality: on the bank of a rivulet or by a well on a farm. Besides, their work begins at night. After lunch, they go to sleep in the shade of a tree.'

I saw a firewood shop right in front of the locality. A heap of empty kerosene tins was lying beside the shop. The roofs of their houses had Mangalore tiles and the walls were made of flattened tins of kerosene. Draped in colourful *kurtas* and *ghagras*, small groups of women were busy doing chores. Both men and women had fair skins and aquiline noses.

All of them were alert the moment they spotted us. They answered my questions in a general and cursory fashion. A farmer from the Ramoshi caste who was known to me and had a farm nearby, happened to come there and vouch for us. After this, the people gradually began to open up.

'Originally, we belonged to the potter caste. We came here from the north, perhaps from Punjab or Kashmir. We had a brick-making business in Kalyan, but it collapsed; then we learned the art of liquor distillation from the Katkaris, and that is now our only trade.'

Theirs is a 'wholesale' business and the barkeepers operating in Pune buy the liquor that is distilled here. Their terms are strictly cash on the nail. These days, a Maratha from Hadapsar is making country

liquor. He is quite close to the Congress party and therefore the police do not harass him, even though he pays less protection money. On the contrary, the Marwari Kumbhars pay much more and still they are not spared.

This particular caste is known for its internecine fights. Bloodshed is also very common, but no one goes to the police. The police will never know if there is a murder within the caste. Even if they get a whiff of the news and reach the house of the victim, his family will not admit that anything has happened.

The Ramoshi farmer spoke: 'I was a witness to a fight between a woman and her mother-in-law. All of a sudden, the husband of the woman (who was also the nephew of the mother-in-law) appeared on the scene and assaulted his aunt with a hammer. The old woman died instantly. The couple then ran away from the scene and hid in a locality in Mundhwa. A session of the *Jati Panchayat* was convened to take cognizance of the matter and the couple was fined a few hundred rupees. Only then were they allowed to come back to this settlement. The children of the deceased mother-in-law are still small; once they grow up, they will take revenge.'

'Will this cycle of revenge go on?'

'Don't even ask. Now, this man [pointing a finger at a quiet and respectable-looking individual] had a brother who was murdered by his cousin a few years ago. This man has just returned from Miraj after killing that cousin.'

'Is this true?' I asked.

The man smiled and nodded.



Phaasepardhis trap birds by using a snare or a noose. These people always carry a trap – made from the entrails of a cow – on their shoulders. They spread their net over a few sticks and scatter foodgrain on the ground. The birds, lured by the grain, come and sit on the net. As they stretch their necks to peck at the grain scattered on the ground below, the Phaasepardhi, who is hiding nearby, swiftly pulls the noose around the bird's neck.

The Pardhis of the Konkan region catch live peacocks. After snaring them, they sew up the eyes of the bird so that it cannot fly away or bother the hunter. The peacocks are then sent to wealthy connoisseurs in Mumbai. The meat of the peacock is considered to be a great delicacy.

But if Phaasepardhis are known for anything, however, it is for their criminal activities. A large chunk of their lives is spent in stealing, getting thrashed by people on the suspicion of theft, then suffering further assaults by the police – who use their own methods of torture – thereafter, prison, and, after release, searching for the caravan of which their wives and children are a part.

Influential men in the village sometimes ask the Phaasepardhis to steal valuables from the houses of their rivals, either out of greed or in revenge. The instigator will conceal the stolen goods and hand over a small part of the goods to the Phaasepardhi once the hue and cry has died down.

A Phaasepardhi youth told me, 'It is true that we steal, but we do it for our survival. We have not built mansions from the proceeds of our thefts.'

Whenever there is a theft in a village, if Phaasepardhis happen to be camping in the vicinity, they are invariably raided by the villagers who proceed to perpetrate collective atrocities on them. In one village in the Marathwada region, the villagers destroyed even the huts of these bird hunters and gang-raped their women. The torture they suffered when they were handed over to police was even worse. Sajjan Kale, a Phaasepardhi activist told me, 'The police use a ruler to roll over our shins and force our feet into tyres before they thrash our soles with a cane. The moment the police sight a Phaasepardhi, they think they have a license to torture him. Even the most innocent among the Phaasepardhis feel that they may as well commit a crime or steal something since they are going to be thrashed anyway.' There is nobody in our society to come forward to make an issue of the atrocities of the police on these poor people.

Sometimes, the police themselves force the Phaasepardhis to steal. They keep the booty to themselves and trap the Pardhis in the bargain.

The police force from Phaltan once mildly threatened a Phaasepardhi woman in order to recover some stolen goods. The Pardhis from Phaltan said, 'The police beat us up very badly. We had not committed the crime. We did not confess and the police would not stop beating us. Then this Shantabai intervened and rebuked the police officer, so they beat her up very badly.'

'Meaning?'

'Ask her, don't make me tell you that,' said the old man.

I looked at the woman. She was reluctant to say anything. After I requested her to speak a few times, she said softly, 'Two policemen held me and tipped me upside down, then the *saheb* took a large pole and thrust it up my arse!'

She started crying as she narrated this story and left the place. The brutality took place in broad daylight on the road and was witnessed by many people. Some activists lodged a complaint against the erring policemen. Finally the government suspended the police inspector and the two constables. A criminal case was launched against them and the police inspector was jailed for fifteen days. An activist from Belgaum who had been to jail for some political cause told me, 'Among our jail inmates, there were many Pardhis with injuries and bruises on their bodies. They told us about the different methods of police torture. The police officer who had beaten this group of Pardhis in the police station happened to visit the prison. The Pardhis saw him and went up to him. They fell at his feet and told him, "We do not get anything here. Give us some money for a few *bidis* at least." The police officer obliged and gave each Pardhi five paise. After the police officer left, I asked the Pardhis, "How could you fall at the feet of the very man who beat you?" "Whatever may have happened, it is they who are like fathers and mothers to us."'

In one of the Pardhi localities, I met an old man. I asked him about the marriage customs among Phaasepardhis. A woman who

heard me ask that question shouted, 'What can he tell you about our marriage customs; he has himself kept many girls in his house. He buys them cheap when they are still infants. If he finds somebody in need, he gives them a loan and ties them in debt. Once a girl child is born, she is handed over to him. He then raises those girls and sells them when they grow up.'

'I am not in that business any more,' said the old man defensively.

'You liar, you have eight girls with you right now. Shall I show them to the guest?' the woman replied spiritedly.

The old man kept quiet thereafter.

Pardhis have many internal rivalries. Sajjan Kale, the Pardhi activist from Nagar district, told me, 'Sometimes when a man's child dies, he pulls out the child's entrails with a knife and then lodges a complaint of murder against his rival. Then the man against whom such a false complaint is lodged is dragged through various courts and *Jati Panchayats* and gets exhausted. Finally the complainant agrees to compromise by taking two to three thousand rupees in exchange for withdrawing the complaint.'

Pardhis have unbounded faith in their goddess. Outside Pune, there is an area called Phule Nagar. In the ground adjacent to this locality, four to five huts of Pardhis have come up. I saw red pieces of buffalo intestines kept for drying on a line. I could also see mud mixed with buffalo blood in the center, and the broken knees and the huge skull of the beast completely skinned with its large black eyes staring at me. An old Pardhi showed me the impressions of the goddess on a metal plate ceremoniously kept on the leaf of the *Nagveli* creeper. They were covered with black, dried blood. The old man told me, 'Our custom is to sacrifice a buffalo to the goddess every year. The previous day, we collect wood and make a fire, on which we set a vessel full of oil to heat. We add the boiling oil to wheat flour and knead it. The boiling oil doesn't scald our hands because our goddess protects us. Then I wear this anklet [he showed me his jingling anklets] get possessed and dance for a long time. The next day I stand near the goddess, take a knife and drive it through the neck of the buffalo. I make a hole to puncture the

artery of the animal and then sprinkle the blood on the image of goddess. We drink the blood that comes from the other side of the artery. Nothing happens to us even if the blood is raw. For therein lies the greatness of our goddess. Then we eat the cooked pieces of the animal. Our goddess says that the remains of the buffalo must be burned. Now, whatever we can eat, we shall eat and the remains shall be consigned to the flames.'

We cannot imagine how totally alienated these Pardhis are from the mainstream culture. This became quite clear in a conference of nomadic tribes held in Phaltan. Someone had brought along half a dozen Pardhi boys and girls aged between ten and fifteen. All these children lolled around on the mat that was spread in the *shamiana*. As the conference came to an end, the participants stood up to sing the national anthem. But the Pardhi children continued to ignore the ceremony and loll on the floor. They watched those who sang the anthem in surprised amusement.



Such is the existence of the nomadic and denotified tribes.

They are cut off from the castes and communities who dwell in villages and even from the Dalits. How is it that they have remained so totally alienated?

Some theories can be proposed. A group of primitive or pastoral people may have refused to change along with the times, and hence remained separate and backward. The upper castes may have realized that they could better exploit these wandering tribes by keeping them isolated from the mainstream. Or maybe these tribes were the original inhabitants of this land, and the new immigrants who arrived here drove the indigenous people out and forced them into a nomadic existence. Or else, these tribes came here from some distant land but the natives did not allow them to get assimilated into society and kept them wandering on its fringes.

These sociological explanations do not, however, address the issues faced by these people today. If mainstream society has any desire to transform their lives, it must learn to look sensitively at their situation. This alone can bring them into the mainstream of society.

These people lead an existence worse than even the *dalits*. The Mahars and the Matangs do have a designated status in the village hierarchy, however low. Oppression of *dalits* may not be resented by a large number of people, but there are at least some who do. Maybe its concern is only perfunctory, but the government does at least order enquiries and action. As against this, the world of the nomadic tribes has been kept beyond the boundaries of our society and polity. None of us feels any responsibility towards them. Last year the villagers and traders of Kalamba village in Osmanabad set fire to the huts of a hundred Phaasepardhis. Learning of this, we say, 'These people steal, what are people to do after all?' (Why is it, though, that nobody sets out to burn the houses of traders who engage in adulteration of goods, doctors who loot their patients or consultants who prepare bogus income-tax records for their clients?)

There are people who feel amused if you tell them about the plight of these tribes. I met a friend who has a passion for horse racing. When he asked me what I was busy with, I replied, 'I am gathering information about nomadic tribes.' 'Then you must interview me!' he said. 'I am also a wanderer. I go wherever the racing season leads me. I have come here from Bangalore and will shortly leave for Mumbai.'

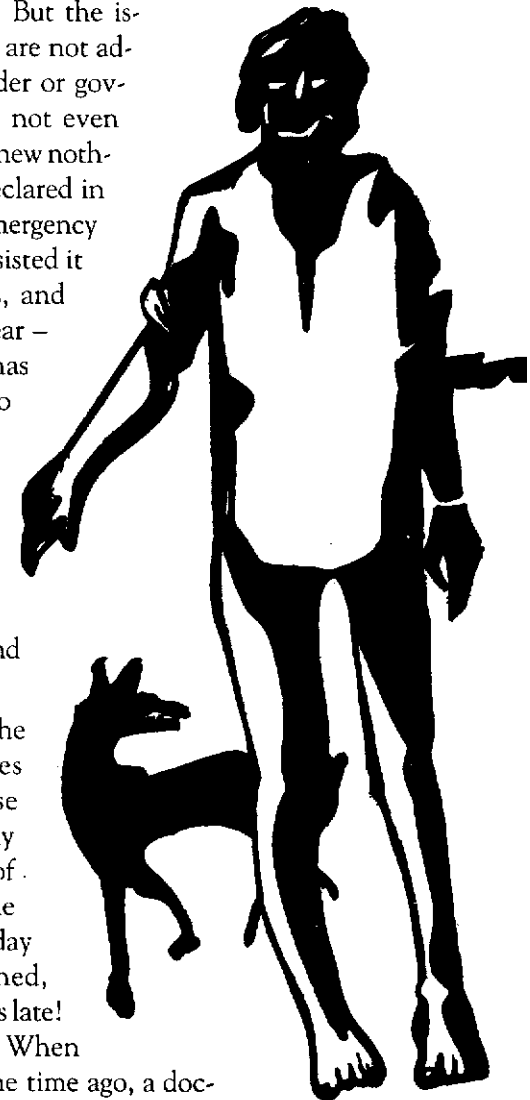
'And where will you pitch your hut in Mumbai? At the Oberoi Sheraton, I presume?' I retorted.

When you tell people about the life of the Vaidus, only their hunting stories are considered of interest. Unlike conventional hunters, they do not set out to enjoy the thrills of the hunt with plenty of guns and other weapons, and a thermos flask of tea. What do they gain by engaging in dangerous crocodile hunts? Each one gets barely a bottle full of crocodile fat and enough meat to last for just one meal. A Madari has to put his life on the line to catch a cobra worth just fifteen rupees in the market. An industrial worker in Pune, the vanguard of the revolution, gets thousands of rupees as compensation when he accidentally loses a finger in a machine.

Our government always has some welfare schemes going. With much fanfare, they celebrate a decade of progress or completion of

one hundred days in office. But the issues of these nomadic tribes are not addressed by any political leader or government. Most of them are not even on the electoral rolls! They knew nothing about the Emergency declared in 1975. Those who clamped emergency on the nation, those who resisted it and fought for basic rights, and those who sat at home in fear – the whole of that society has been completely indifferent to the plight of these tribes for hundreds, even thousands, of years. Our elections, educational system, health system, housing schemes and banks were never designed with them in mind and cannot ever reach them.

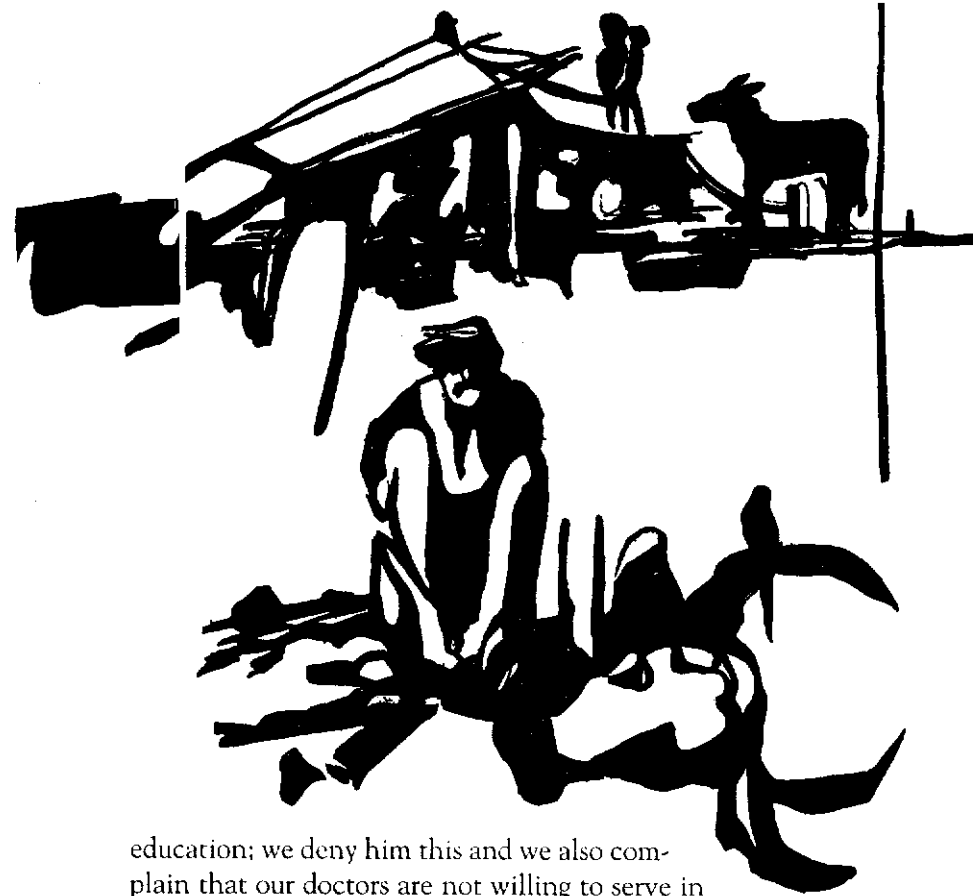
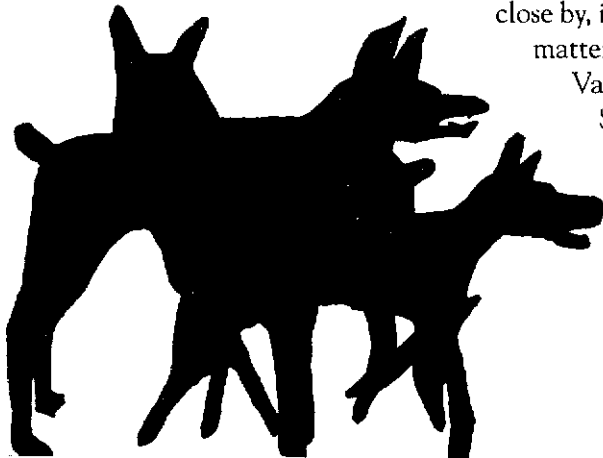
We feel disturbed when the roofs of our cement houses leak. But the huts of these people are scattered by any strong wind and the floors of their huts become mud in the slightest drizzle. The other day a friend of mine complained, 'One gets cooking gas ten days late! It is such an inconvenience.' When milk had become scarce some time ago, a doctor friend of mine was very worried, 'Because of this milk shortage, one cannot get Cadbury chocolates and cheeselings in the market. And my daughter refuses to go to school without a Cadbury chocolate!' When smuggling had been curbed, a young lady said, 'That lipstick from abroad is not available here any more. And the local brand is so bad, it



makes your lips feel constricted; and regular use makes your lips turn black.' We are so engrossed in these frivolous needs that when a Pardhi women has a pole thrust up her anus in public, we do not feel any pain. The pain that is important is the constriction of our lips due to bad lipstick.

Those from the higher rungs of society who have the will or ability to look beyond themselves, will find that there is tremendous work to be done on this front. The benefits of the various welfare schemes launched by the present system and government must be made to reach the nomadic tribes. The Bharadi people have been traditionally rearing buffaloes and selling them. No bank is willing to extend loans to them as they are not considered credit-worthy. (The speculator who declares bankruptcy ten times in five years gets plenty of credit from the banks instead.) If the rules of the banks are such that they cannot give them loans, then we must demand that the rules be changed. Schools must be set up where tribes which trade in buffaloes can be taught about their care, diseases, medicines etc. The officials in the education department are bound to ask how these tribes can utilize schools. But these tribes do not move from village to village on a daily basis. Vadgaon for two months, Hadapsar for another two months or so – such are their longish halts. The teachers must go there and teach them. If this is inconvenient for middle-class officials who have become accustomed to have all facilities – the bus stop, mar-

ket, workplace, schools – close by, it does not much matter. A progressive Vaidu like Shiddu Shinde is willing to avail of our



education; we deny him this and we also complain that our doctors are not willing to serve in rural areas. This must change. Whatever medical help – good, bad or indifferent – reaches the interior villages and remote hilly regions – is due to the Vaidus. If they are given adequate medical training (without laying down any conditions regarding prior qualifications), our rural health schemes can become successes. We have all seen the spirit of service that animates our so-called qualified doctors.

Today, no beggar tribe can survive on its traditional occupations. Our society's needs have changed, and these occupations are on the verge of extinction. These people must be assimilated into trades, occupations and jobs that are useful to society. Some tribes have already taken steps in this direction. Due to their no-

madic habits, even after settling in cities, they have accepted trades that require much movement from one place to another – for example, women who exchange utensils for old garments, those who trade in waste paper, tin makers, stove repairers, candy floss sellers, people who show movies on street corners, those who sell pig bristles, etc. We can help strengthen their position in the waste paper or old garments trade. We can ensure that they get maximum returns for their effort by doing away with the middlemen.

Pharmaceutical companies require snake venom. If Madaris are taught simple methods of collecting the venom, and if arrangements are made for quick transfer of the venom to refrigerated facilities, the Madaris would earn more and venom wastage would be avoided.

The issue of denotified (erstwhile 'criminal') tribes like Phaasepardhis is more difficult. First of all, these nomads must be given protection from the police. When a person belonging to these tribes is suspected of some crime, the police resort to extreme measures without bothering to wait for any evidence. Acting firmly against such perverted practices is also of benefit to our upper classes, as these practices may one day recoil on them. The educated, meek and god-fearing among us do not have the faintest idea regarding what goes on at night in our local police station. Just as the activists in Phaltan took up the issue of the police atrocity on the Pardhi woman, we must take up numerous such instances in Maharashtra and ensure that the guilty officers are punished; only then will the monsters in the police force come under control. To do this, journalists must work hard. Instead of dwelling on 'Indira Gandhi and the Gang of Four', photographs of 'ghosts', 'boy meets girl' stories, and suchlike sensational matters, they should turn their efforts towards such issues. The crime reporters, who write their stories at night in the police station as they drink the tea provided by the police inspector, or those favoured writers who produce ingratiating and flattering stories about the bravery and analytical abilities of the police, must learn to keep their eyes open and expose the tales of oppression and atrocity that the tribals suffer. They must investigate and provide the evidence.

Our deep ignorance about the nomadic and denotified tribes should not become an excuse for our leadership to ignore their problems. To avoid this, we must pull down the barriers separating us from these groups and begin a process of social exchange. Instead of sitting in clubs, expounding on 'women's lib' and pretending to be radical, organizing hairstyling workshops for ladies and giving live demonstrations of almond and black-currant pickle-making, the need is to come forward and extend a helping hand to the wife of an Uttam Gosavi, understand the plight of a Shantabai Pardhi, and alleviate the woes of Joshi women. The women who complete their graduation as an excuse to pass time till their marriage, and then spend their afternoons lolling about and reading glossy film and women's magazines, or just about anybody who has some education, could benefit tribal children by making some effort to assist them. At least the children would learn proper social behaviour through contact with society at large. They have a great need of basic literacy, vocational training and, if possible, exposure to mainstream value systems. At one level of our society there is so much education that it is being wasted instead of being used gainfully, and on another level, there is a total absence of it. This must be changed.

Nomadic and denotified tribes must integrate into the mainstream of society at the earliest. The earlier this happens, the better it is for them. The longer they remain isolated from the mainstream, the more they will be kept away from it, with the attitude that 'these tribes are irrevocably different'. At the same time these tribes must understand that as long as they remain 'thieves', even if this is for their basic subsistence, society will not be sympathetic to them. And what does their traditional occupation have to offer them in any case? It doesn't give them enough to eat; besides, they have to live the life of fugitives, suffer police torture, and face imprisonment and social ostracism. It is in their interest to earn their livelihood through socially acceptable means. It is difficult to pick up a new life-style, it may take a long time; but through these means, at least the future generations can escape from this vicious cycle.

For their own good, all these tribes must redefine their idea of identity and autonomy if they really wish to get assimilated into the mainstream of society. It is true that hundreds of years of caste tradition have become part of their consciousness, but they must cast aside practices that are no longer acceptable to society. Practices like not reporting to the police when there is a murder within the caste-group, killing a girl just because she is born with a whorl of hair on her forehead, burying a Bairagi alive because he lets his golden earring fall on the ground, and performing human sacrifice as a part of *Bhanamati* rituals must immediately be discarded. The *Jati Panchayats* can exercise their jurisdiction over matters concerning money, marriages, festivals, customs etc., but those acts which are seen as criminal by society at large must be handed over to the judicial system for adjudication under the Constitution.

Some of the young people within the tribes have realized the need to change their age-old customs and bring them in tune with changing times. With their limited numbers and strength, they are trying to bring their tribes' social life more in tune with modern times. They sometimes pay a heavy price for these efforts. Those among us outsiders who sympathize with such reformers must give them every kind of assistance, especially intellectual support. They must be given an understanding and vision that will help them liberate their castes from the influence of primitive deities like Kalubai, Mhasoba, Satwai and Jotiba.

The young generation of tribals wishing to reform their social life should examine the customs and practices prevalent within their tribes and turn the mind of their community towards shedding those that are not acceptable in our times. 'If God is omnipotent and has created human beings and animals, how is it that before him you sacrifice animals which he has himself created?' Such arguments may carry weight with the tribals. They must be enlightened about the burden of indebtedness that has descended upon all because of the dowry system. Instead of dwelling upon the 'warrior lineage' of the tribe, it would be better to dwell upon the present reality and make efforts to improve their lot. They must be convinced about all these things. Intellectuals should come for-

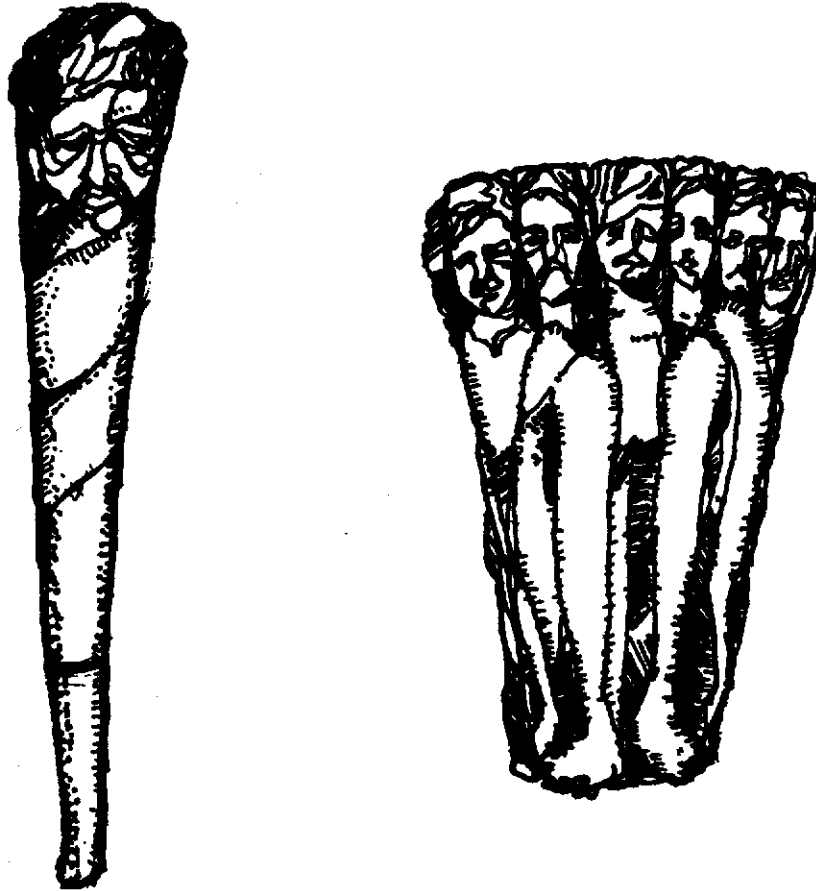
ward and think up ways and means to transmit this new vision to the tribals. We must stop wasting time traveling from one seminar to another, making fine studies of society and country as we fly above them in planes. We should rather put up with some hardship, mix with the youth of the tribes and help them.

There is an organization called 'The Nomadic and Denotified Tribes Association', led by Daulatrao Bhosale. Over the past few years, this association has been able to forge unity among about thirty-seven different castes. Each tribe's pride, the internal egos and vested interests among the *panchas* of these castes – these are major stumbling blocks in the path of strengthening the organization and its work. So far this work has been political in nature. 'We must be included in the list of scheduled tribes,' or, 'We must be given our share of power': such are the Association's demands. Social reform and improvement have as yet remained outside the purview of the association. But there are many young people within the association who are determined to bring about social reform and have already been working towards this within their communities. These young persons must work hard and with determination. And they must receive help and support from outside their communities.

As you observe the world of wandering tribes, you are reminded of the Siberian cranes that come here in the winter because it snows in their homeland, or herds of African elephants migrating in search of greenery. For thousands of years these elephants have followed the same route on their migrations and returned to the starting-point. In some years, if the summer is excessively harsh or there is a drought, where are they to find water and greenery? But the elephants follow the same trail, along the route marked by the skeletons of elephants that died during earlier migrations. Those who survive, move onwards; those that fall leave their bones along the trail.

The situation of the nomadic tribes appears hardly dissimilar.

Nipani – Dark Town



The name of Nipani town has figured prominently in the newspapers of Maharashtra for the last twenty-five years. The Fazal Ali Commission recommended that this Marathi-speaking region should be a part of Karnataka, and since then, Nipani has been appearing, along with many other places, in the list of areas sought to be included in Unified Maharashtra. The border dispute is still unresolved; for this reason, Nipani keeps cropping up from time to time in the media.

Even before the movement for a unified Maharashtra, this city was known to everybody for its crops of strong tobacco. School-going children in Maharashtra learn two bits of general knowledge by rote: one, that the city of Nagpur is famous for its oranges; and two, that Nipani is famous for its tobacco. This region produces the highest yield of tobacco in India. Moreover, the tobacco grown here has the highest content of nicotine. Therefore, the name of this town has been permanently linked to tobacco.

Nipani is about twenty-five miles from Kolhapur, a bus journey of an hour or so. Although the city has now been included in Karnataka, its association with Kolhapur (and therefore, Maharashtra) in many respects remains strong even today. The State of Maharashtra ends just about a kilometer this side of Nipani. As one enters the region, one sees dark black soil all around. Saplings of tobacco, with their large green leaves, planted in neat rows stand out prominently against this dark background.

The moment you enter the city, however, you choke on the tobacco dust. Here even ordinary dust is full of tobacco. Tobacco godowns looking like forts with long granite walls punctuated by huge shutters or doors can be found all along the road. Beyond the fortified walls, one can see the three-or four-storied, garishly painted mansions of the tobacco tycoons. As one passes these godowns, the tobacco dust becomes heavier. Many women are seen standing in a queue with open boxes full of rolled *bidis* in front of the tobacco factories. From time to time, long imported cars – Mercedes, Cadillacs, Dodges – whiz past. The highly purified petrol required for these cars is available in Nipani. Off and on, you pass the grand, multi-storied mansions of tobacco traders and *bidi* factory owners.

The middle-class of Nipani lives in the heart of the city – an area of narrow alleys. The doors of the latrines – with baskets to collect the night soil – open out on to the road. There is an all-pervasive stench, a familiar characteristic of any *taluka* town. The crowded, busy city market – which glitters at night – is situated along the two wide roads that intersect each other. Visit any liquor shop and you can get bottles of expensive foreign liquors, otherwise available only in metropolises like Mumbai.

In the other part of the city, rows of small tin sheds and dilapidated clay houses with tiled roofs dominate the landscape. This is the residential area of the *bidi* workers. Heaps of waste *bidi* leaf fragments can be seen piled up in front of every doorstep. Once these get wet and begin to rot, their stink fills up the whole neighbourhood. This unmistakeable odour is to be found in all areas where *bidi* workers reside. To this unpleasant smell is to be added the stench of the open gutters flowing through the locality.

The houses are made of rusted tin sheets joined together. At most one may see a grocery shop or two with a tiled roof. Nights in the locality are pitch dark. Innumerable workers roll *bidis* in every house by the light of dim kerosene lamps.

A glance at the rooms in the locality reveals what was originally a single room has been partitioned using sheets of cloth into three or four compartments by the families living there in close proximity. Each family inhabits an area five feet by five. A couple must squeeze themselves into this space, the man and woman sitting facing each other, with a bamboo tray full of tobacco leaves on their thighs. Once two persons are seated in the space, there is space for no more. The children either play near the threshold or, if they can, assist in their parents' work. A baby's cradle will be hung overhead. All that the parents sitting below need to do is gently rock it with one hand when the baby cries. A cooking-stove sits in a corner, with utensils stacked on the wall. In the midst of all this, a valiant attempt has been made to decorate the available space on the walls with multicoloured calendars depicting images of gods and goddesses.

The 'rooms' are thrown together haphazardly and so there is almost no light or circulation of air. The only available light comes from a few rays of sunlight entering through the holes in the rusted iron sheets. (During the monsoons, rainwater comes in through the same gaps as well.) Hundreds of silent people sit in this darkness, working day and night.

Though these houses are cramped and inconvenient, the rent is as high as ten, fifteen or even twenty rupees. One landlady has rented out several such cubicles in her house. It pains her to turn away a prospective tenant and she fits him anyhow into the already cramped space. But the other tenants' rent is not reduced in any way because of the reduction in space. The nature of *bidi* workers – making do with whatever condition they find themselves in – works to her advantage.

One can guess the religion and caste of the workers from the pictures adorning the walls. Photographs depicting the Haj and quotations from the Koran will be found in Muslim households, whereas images of gods and goddess are common in Hindu households; a few houses have pictures of the Buddha and Dr. Ambedkar. Although people of many different castes and religions live here, Muslims and Telugu people dominate.

The colony of workers wakes up early, around at four in the morning. The *tembhurni* (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) leaves that the workers have brought from the factory the previous evening have been put out to soak overnight in water. Once they are soft, the workers snip off the rotten parts. The factory provides a small, square metal piece – this is placed on the leaves and they are cut into as many uniform squares as possible. The work goes on through the early hours of the morning. If the employer supplies poor quality leaves, the work involved increases. Cutting leaves is unpaid labour – workers are paid for *bidis* rolled, not for cutting leaves.

The wife wakes up early along with her husband, because she too has to roll *bidis* all day, which means that it is more convenient to finish cooking and other household chores before the day breaks. Husband and wife, along with any other adult available in the household, sit down to roll *bidis* with a tray of *jarda* in front of

them, and go on rolling *bidis* till late at night. *Bidi* rolling is not easy work, and takes time to learn. The *bidi* leaves are kept between two pieces of jute, held under the worker's thighs. He first pulls out a piece of leaf from under his thigh and places a pinch of tobacco on it. He has to be precise. The *bidi* becomes too hollow if enough tobacco is not used; if too much is used, fewer *bidis* can be rolled from the same amount of tobacco and the worker will be paid that much less. The leaf, with a pinch of tobacco powder in it, is then rolled using the index fingers and thumbs of both hands. Pressure must be so applied as to make one end of the *bidi* narrower than the other. Care also has to be taken to ensure that the vein on the leaf is not vertically aligned along the length of the *bidi*, for then it burns out too quickly; the vein must pass obliquely across. Finally, the ends of the *bidi* are folded in with the fingers – this is called 'applying the fingernails'. Then a thread is rolled round it and twisted tight. The *bidi* is now ready. The factory supplies a tin tube in the shape of a *bidi*, to check whether the *bidi* rolled is of the required size – neither too long nor too short. The rolled *bidis* are then sorted into bundles. This part of the job is done by the children.

Bidis not conforming to the factory standard are put aside by the checkers. Such *bidis* are called '*chhat*'. Though the factory owners make money on these *bidis*, by mixing them with regular *bidis*, the workers are not paid for them. On the contrary, the factory deducts the cost of the leaves from their wages for having wasted them.

On account of this, workers are terrified of such *chhat bidis*. Their minds are constantly burdened as they work by the thought that they cannot make such *bidis*.

The work of rolling *bidis* starts around seven in the morning and continues till all the *jarda* is used up. All members of the household, including young children who help with small jobs, keep working at a stretch till eight at night, sometimes even till ten. Fingers move like machines. In the afternoon, people take turns to get up, have lunch, and get back to work. In the daytime, they work in inadequate light. After dusk, the workers light an impro-

vised kerosene lamp made from a bottle, with a cloth wick popping out of its lid. Even as these lamps belch out thick black smoke, the workers continue with the help of the weak light.

The trip to the factory for depositing the finished product and bringing back tobacco leaves for rolling *bidis* the next day is called *hajeri* or *khep*. Earlier this was done in the evening and was quite convenient for the workers who could work through the day and hand in the finished product in the evening. Now, the factory owners have, for their own convenience, fixed the time between 11 a.m. and 1 p.m. for this work. This causes great inconvenience to the workers, because they must now interrupt the work to make the trip to the factory around the middle of the day, just as the work has fallen into a rhythm. One such trip takes about an hour and a half. The workers cannot send someone else on their behalf to the factory; the adult in whose name the work is given must go personally. Despite complaints by the workers, the timings have not been changed. Now workers save time by borrowing tobacco from one another to keep the work going at home while they make the trip to the factory.

How much money do they earn for this labour, lasting 12 to 14 hours a day, in which all the members of the household, including children, participate? Four rupees and seventy paise for rolling a thousand *bidis*. On average, a worker can roll about one thousand *bidis* per day. Even workers who can roll more than that are supplied with tobacco enough for just one thousand *bidis*.

The rate fixed by the government is five rupees and twenty paise per thousand *bidis*, but in actual practice the rate of Rs.4.70 prevails everywhere. At some places, this can be as low as Rs.4.30, and in the villages near Nipani in fact it has come down to Rs.3.20. If *chhat bidis* are debited, the net earning will come down further.

'You do this one task the whole day, how is it you don't get bored?' I asked a stubbled, emaciated old worker.

Coughing, inhaling deeply from a *bidi*, he replied, 'My head spins with this work, but what is to be done? One has no time to look at oneself. Do not allow any thoughts to enter your head. If one starts thinking, the work slows down. A man gets completely

tied down by this work. Even if a guest from a distant village comes to meet us, we tell him, "If we spend time talking to you and entertaining you now, no food will be cooked in this house tomorrow. Please don't take it to heart." The poor fellow then goes back. We are so tied up in this work that we cannot go for weddings. We can't even go for the funeral of a relative or someone close to us. We do want to, but then we think of our children.'

Due to the unmitigated monotony of this work, the worker's mood is affected. He becomes irritable. He starts shouting at his children and beats them up without reason. To overcome boredom, he smokes *bidis* continuously. The *bidis* in the market are roasted, but the worker smokes raw *bidis* from among those he is rolling, which is more harmful to his health. This monotonous job goes on all day, and then again the next day, and the day after, for months and years together. It has no end.

In other jobs, a worker has some chance of getting some sort of promotion as he becomes more and more skilful, but in *bidi* rolling there is no such possibility. You learn this work after some days, thereafter it is only monotony. Rather than improving, one's speed also diminishes with time. A worker named Imam Gavandi told me, 'You can roll *bidis* with great efficiency in your initial years, but as you grow older, your fingers lose their strength and become weak. When young, you can roll a *bidi* in one go, later the same *bidi* takes three to four attempts. Often, the *bidi* remains hollow. Secondly, the fingers develop thick calluses, because of which one can't even tie a knot to the *bidi* thread. When a *bidi* is being rolled, one can't take one's eyes off it – one has to take care that the wrong side of the leaf is not being used, that its vein is not vertically aligned and that the knot is properly made. This weakens the eyesight of a worker. Old people suffer very badly in this profession.'

In a corner sat an extremely old woman, with her head bent between her knees. Her face was all wrinkles. Her name was Aminabai Babu. She had spent her entire life since childhood rolling *bidis*. One can roll *bidis* efficiently with the fingers only by steadying both elbows against one's abdomen. Hence, the elbow

joints remain immobile for long stretches of time. Aminabai's elbows have now frozen into right angles. She tried to straighten her arms to show me but could not do so. She also tried to raise her arms, but could not get them beyond her shoulders.

Workers reach a pitiable state after their fiftieth year. They are not able to work as well, but cannot feed themselves unless they roll a thousand *bidis* every day. When the body is worn out, the same amount of work takes longer. Besides, one rolls a lot of hollow *bidis*, and often, the thread holding them remains loose at the ends. This increases the percentage of *chhat bidis*, reducing income. When the number of such rejected *bidis* crosses a certain limit, the factory stops issuing the worker any more tobacco. This means virtual starvation. To avoid this, they must go to other workers, get tobacco from them and rolls *bidis* for them. But when the workers find the number of *chhat bidis* increasing, they tell the old workers to fend for themselves.

The old man's children may be in the same trade, but they too have their own families to support and can barely manage. In this profession, one cannot support a non-working member of the family. That is why, as soon as a boy comes of age, he sets up home independently. At an age when others are enjoying the bliss of playing with their grandchildren or listening to religious discourses, an old worker is forced to beg for a living.

One such worker told me, 'Some of us go to other villages and beg there.'

'Why other villages?'

'Begging in one's own village means losing one's honour. But no one knows you elsewhere. Those who resort to begging start wearing *lungis* and tie a piece of cloth around their foreheads, hoping that they will not be recognised. We see such people from our village sometimes when we visit other villages.'

Such beggars finally die, unknown even to their family members.

This is the condition of old *bidi* workers, but that of the young is not good either. *Bidi* rolling is an invitation to disease. As the work doesn't involve much bodily movement, a worker's blood

circulation becomes sluggish. Such bodies are vulnerable to disease. The work is done in dark, cramped quarters; the body hardly gets any fresh air and light.

‘Why don’t you roll *bidis* out in the open?’ I asked a worker toiling away in a dark corner of a house.

‘The slightest puff of wind outside blows off the *jarda*. It is better to suffer in the darkness inside!’

The lungs of these workers are choked with carbon from the thick dark smoke of the kerosene lamps at night and the smoke from raw *bidis* during the day. Such lungs are easy prey for tuberculosis germs. With all the work at home, even workers who fall sick cannot take leave. There is no question of any reimbursement for the money spent on medicines. And there is no time to stand in the long queues at the government hospital. The workers just live with their illnesses. When tuberculosis victims are forced to work hard on a half-empty stomach, it is obvious that it will not take long for them to succumb to the disease. Though these people leave behind no other inheritance, they do leave their children the legacy of tuberculosis.

The *bidi* worker is usually slight of build. With hollow cheeks, unkempt, dry hair and hunchbacked, they walk as though they are being pushed from the rear. I asked one such worker, ‘This work is so troublesome, besides it barely gives you a livelihood. Why don’t you do some other work?’

‘What other work can we do? We have learnt to roll *bidis* and that is all we can do,’ he said.

‘Can’t you earn more money even doing unskilled labour?’

‘We can’t do it. A person who rolls *bidis* cannot survive in any other job because his body is sapped of all its strength. Besides, we are so accustomed to sitting in the dark that if we take just ten steps in the sunlight, we feel faint.’

A *bidi* worker may be unable to escape, but what about his children, do they have any way out? They can get some education and go in for some other work. A worker said caustically about a school in his area, ‘Do you call that place a school? The teacher

comes in for just an hour or two. As soon as he comes, he asks his students to write the numbers from one to 100 and sits there reading story books. Children in the fifth standard are not even able to recognise the letters of the alphabet. They begin to get up to mischief. They may get into brawls or bring some misfortune upon themselves. We ourselves tell them to stay at home and work under our supervision.’

‘We are so impoverished that we can’t even stitch clothes for our children, so how do we send them to school?’ added another worker.

Children of *bidi* workers are made to sit and cut *tembhurni* leaves in which *bidis* are rolled. As they grow a little older, they are taught to tie the *bidis* with thread. As they pick up the work, they too get trapped. Once they reach the age of fourteen or so, the dearth of food, clothes and everything else at home often prompts these children to run away to Mumbai or Pune.

‘But what do they do there?’

‘They sleep on pavements. Since they know how to roll *bidis*, they go to a *bidi* factory. There is one thing about this work – you can always get work if you are willing. When you are young, you can work more. You can go to restaurants and movies. Your troubles start once you get married. Families of *bidi* workers can never afford two square meals.’

A *bidi* worker named Niyaz told me, ‘Come and visit our locality in the morning. You will find many workers trying to borrow ten or twenty paise from their neighbours. Often, a worker cannot make his morning tea unless he borrows money. But the neighbours’ plight is just the same. They are in the same position – a single daily meal throughout the year. Where are they to get the money from? And this doesn’t change; it cannot change, even at festival time. During festivals, if someone in our neighborhood sends us a bowl of sweetmeats, that is our festival. Other children wear new garments on festive occasions; our children can only gape at them. Even if we want to raise money by pawning some utensils, no decent moneylender is willing to accept them as guarantee. And we can’t afford the Pathan.’

Money-lending Pathans (originally from Afghanistan, they have traditionally been moneylenders) have established themselves quite well in Nipani.

They charge exorbitant rates of interest from impoverished groups like *bidi* workers. For every five rupees given as loan they charge an interest of one rupee twenty-five paise per week. This works out to about twelve hundred percent per year. These Pathans keep two cloth shops in Nipani – but these are only a façade. The shops have a few rolls of cloth in their cupboards for show, but the real business is moneylending. The antechambers of these shops are infamous among the *bidi* workers. Here defaulting workers are given a sound thrashing to recover their loans. Pathans come frequently to the worker's colony and beat and abuse them. Their lending business stopped during the Emergency, but as soon as it was lifted, they recovered the interest lost during that period as well.

Since the income from *bidis* is barely enough to feed oneself, a worker is compelled to approach a Pathan whenever there is some additional expenditure, like the expenses connected with a marriage. An old worker said, 'These days when we want to arrange marriages of our girls, we just show them to the would-be bridegroom and tell him, "If you like the girl, take her and marry her. Don't even bother to call us for the marriage ceremony, we are incapable of spending anything on the marriage."' "

No matter how much one reduces one's wants, some needs do raise their heads even if there is no money for them. This pushes the worker into debt. There are dues to be paid to the grocery shop. Since incomes remain the same or even reduce, loans taken cannot be repaid. When the creditor starts to pressurise the worker, there is no alternative but to leave the town and go to work at other *bidi* factories in other areas. There again, within five or six years the worker gets caught in the same debt trap, and is forced to migrate from there as well. Ask any old *bidi* worker about his past, and you will find that he has shifted home at least half a dozen times. These migrations are a large storehouse of experience.

Amir Sheikh, an activist, narrated his story. He is around forty and has pockmarks all over his face. He lost one of his eyes due to smallpox when he was a child. He lost his father when he was still a child. His mother placed him as an apprentice at a *bidi* factory in Bangalore. One of the workers there was his *guru*. In the first year, the *guru* taught him to 'apply the nails' (tuck in the leaves of rolled *bidis*) and paid him a wage of one paisa for a whole day's work. The next year, the *guru* taught him to roll *bidis* and paid him one Anna (six paise) a day. The *guru* would rap Amir's knuckles with a stick every time he made a mistake. Later, Amir got a job at a *bidi* factory in Hyderabad at a wage of one rupee per day. In the year 1948 the Nizam's rule in Hyderabad came to an end, changing the equation between Hindus and Muslims. Amir was no longer happy in Hyderabad, so he went to Mumbai. He did not get any work there. Pune was the same. Finally, he got work in Miraj and stayed there.

Said Amir: '*Bidi* rolling did not provide even the basics in Miraj, so I would survive by collecting the wheat flour spilt on the ground in flour mills and making *rotis* from that. But I was in the flush of my youth. I would do trade union work. After I got married, my wife and I both worked for the trade union. A child was born to us there. Around this time, my sister-in-law got tuberculosis. Since the climate in Miraj is considered to be healthy, she came to stay in our house. Although our own earnings were meagre, we arranged for her treatment. Both my wife and I would be out for long periods on account of trade union work. My sister-in-law was in charge of our house. She never took any precautions regarding her disease, despite our telling her to do so. She would kiss our young son and feed him from her own plate. If the milk was spoilt, she would not notice this, and would give the child this milk. Later the child also got tuberculosis. We had gone out and the child's health deteriorated. Our neighbours admitted him to a hospital. He died there. When we went to collect the dead body, the doctor said, "First settle your bill of hundred and twenty-five rupees and only then will you get the dead body." I told the doctor, "I don't have even a rupee and a quarter, so from where do I bring the money you are asking for? No one will even lend me money here, because I have been unable to repay earlier loans." The doc-

tor replied, "Then you must give us your blood and allow us to remove whichever organs we want from your child. Then you will get the body." We hardened our hearts and agreed. That is how we got the dead body of our son. Soon thereafter, my sister-in-law also died, and then we left Miraj.'

'Why did you leave that city?'

'I hated to stay in the town in which I had lost my beloved child. So I left Miraj and came here to Nipani.'

Amir's pockmarked, half-blind face was frozen with sorrow as he told me all this.

Each worker in this colony of hapless workers had numerous similar tales of a wandering life. The recurrent theme in all of them was the gradual sapping away of the life force and the worsening plight of the workers.

But even here, one sometimes came across a few lively souls. I met Krishna, a Tamil worker, in the same colony. He was about thirty-five years old, smart in speech and manner. His co-workers described him as a person who would not tolerate injustice meted out to any *bidi* worker. He tried to set up workers' organisations. Factory owners knew him as a quarrelsome man. They would reduce his work and finally have him thrown out. But that did not bother him in the least. When things became impossible for him, he just left for the next town.

I asked him, 'Why do you do this? Are you not afraid of being out of work?'

Somewhat embarrassed, he replied in broken Hindi, 'I just can't stand it. Suppose I go to a new place and start *bidi* work, and see some checker cheating a woman, my temperature rises. I begin a fight. Then the factory owner sacks me. I then go to another factory owner and start to work for him. After two to three changes of job, my name enters the black list of all the *bidi* factories of the area, so I simply leave that town. But I keep telling people that you must fight and struggle. If you fight, at least you get something.'

Today, Krishna does not get any work in Nipani. He survives by borrowing tobacco from other workers and rolling *bidis* for them.

But these workers too have their own difficulties, so Krishna is now preparing to leave for the next town. But people like Krishna are an exception; otherwise it is the nature of these workers to suffer passively.

'Your condition is so terrible. God alone knows how you bear it!' I said to one worker.

'If you see the condition of the *bidi* workers of Nizamabad, you will say that we are far better. Nizamabad is in Andhra Pradesh, on the border with Maharashtra. *Bidi* workers from there migrate to Nipani because the conditions here are better. But why go to Nizamabad, just look around here. See the plight of the women who do the work of pounding tobacco here in Nipani itself. It is so pathetic that we appear fortunate,' he said.



Around 17,000 women in Nipani are employed in the business of pounding tobacco. The work involves hammering the large tobacco leaves by hand, then separating the sticks from the powder, and finally, straining the powder through a sieve. The finished product is called *jarda*, which is the tobacco used in *bidis*. This work remains suspended during the four months of the monsoon which means there is no employment for these women during that period. Yet the women are hardly able to rest in these months. They will labour instead in the fields cultivated by their husbands taken on a sharecropping basis.

These women walk a distance of five to six miles every day from the villages around Nipani to reach the tobacco factories. Their husbands are either farm labourers or sharecroppers. Since they cannot survive on this income alone, their wives are forced put up with all the hardships and pound tobacco for eight to ten months of the year.

The shutters of the tobacco godowns are downed at exactly eight in the morning. The women have to somehow get to the godowns before that. Even if a woman is just a few steps away and runs to reach the closing shutters, the *munim* pushes her back and pulls the shutters down. He will also abuse her. If a woman reaches

late, her whole day is wasted. The *munims* never relent, however much the woman may plead with them or however bitterly she may cry.

A woman who has reported for work at eight in the morning gets out only around one-thirty or two at night. If her lunch break of forty-five minutes is excluded, she works continuously for about fourteen hours a day. She is paid Rs 4.80 for this work. The wages in some village godowns are even lower.

Work in tobacco godowns is extremely difficult. Except for a few, most of them are located in the old part of the city. The places in which the women have to work are dark, cramped and damp. There is no scope for circulation of fresh air and darkness rules here even during the day. Inside, the women keep working like machines.

Clouds of tobacco dust float all around within the godowns. The moment one enters, one begins to choke and cough incessantly. The grain godowns in Pune are also full of dust, but the choking feeling caused by tobacco dust is something else. A newcomer develops a bitter taste in the mouth within a short time which soon turns into nausea. 'This is nothing but poison,' is how the women working in the godowns describe this dust. When the veins in the tobacco leaves are pounded, a cloud of fine particles and fibres – *dhas* – is produced. It is this that causes the really severe choking and coughing. The cloud is so thick that one cannot see a person standing a few feet away. The women are totally covered with the dust. It settles all over them – on their hair, eyebrows, eyelashes. Clothed in tattered, patched-up *sarees* full of holes, they cover their heads with the *pallu* and then wrap it across their faces. And yet, the dust keeps relentlessly entering their nostrils and lungs; it causes one to become woozy; the women work as if under the influence of an intoxicant.

Inside the godown, one finds a heap of tobacco leaves piled from one end of the room to the other. The women sit on both sides of this heap in rows, rhythmically pounding the leaves. As the women sitting on one side of the heap lift up their large pestles, the group sitting opposite them bring down theirs. The work goes on in this machine-like rhythm.

Several large sieves with different mesh sizes – ranging from very fine to coarse – stand in one corner of the room, leaning against the wall. The pounded tobacco is poured through these sieves to segregate the different grades of tobacco. This operation too generates a thick cloud of tobacco dust.

Women who are new to this work suffer considerably. They throw up all the time. The vomiting stops only once they get used to the work, but the coughing, choking and bitter taste in the mouth continues.

The job of pounding the leaves becomes even more of a torment when the tobacco has been sprayed with insecticide, as the poison leaches into the hands of the workers. Women can get a high fever due to this. When they do, they are immediately sent back home by the owners. They lose their wages for three or four days, and, in addition, they have to pay out money for medicines.

Male coolies do the work of shifting the tobacco leaves, tobacco sticks and *jarda* (packed in longish gunny-bags) and stacking them inside the godown. Since women are paid less than the men, there are some factory owners who will employ women for such backbreaking work. Since the women need the work, they must do it, whether they can take the strain or not.

It is difficult to imagine the monotony and bondage that this long work schedule has imposed upon these women. They get off from work at about two in the night and walk to their villages in groups to keep each other company. Usually, a male coolie from the same village accompanies them. If one of them happens to have a lantern, their nightly walk is a little easier. The villages of Shendur, Tavangi, and Shirgutti are close to Nipani, but Yernal, Soudalga and Shippur are among those located at a distance of six to seven miles. Some of the villages are located on hills. It takes about an hour and a half for the women of these villages to reach their homes. Fourteen hours of work, and then a climb. Tired out, they get home, but even so cannot afford the luxury of a full night's sleep, as they have to get up early the following morning to fetch water and to cook for their families. There is no escape from this routine drudgery of cooking and cleaning. By the time they are done with these

chores it is already seven in the morning, and they have to literally run towards the tobacco godowns to be able to reach before the shutters are pulled down.

The farm labourer husbands of these women go to their farms early in the morning. Old women who can still walk also go to the godowns to pound *jarda*. Only very old people and children remain at home. These villages remain virtually empty from early morning till late at night.

In the early hours of the morning, one can see bands of women workers from distant villages hastening towards Nipani. Each of these women carries on her head a pan containing her meal of *bhakri* for the afternoon. One often sees women taking bites from their *bhakris* as they run towards their destinations. A woman remarks: 'Even a dog stands still to eat, but we eat on the run. See the hard times that are upon us!'

'Why don't you eat your *bhakri* after reaching the godown?'

'As if the factory owner would allow that! Will his work not suffer then?'

The *bhakri* are eaten at the most with mashed green chilies. How is one to drink water while running to the godowns? A female *bidi* worker from the *bidi* workers' colony has made arrangements for this. She keeps a pitcher of water and a jug by the roadside. Women rushing towards their workplace stop here. One of them pours the water from the jug, while the others drink it from their cupped palms. The *bidi* worker keeps refilling the pitcher. A *jarda* worker described this woman as 'one who has accumulated great divine merit, because so many women bless her in the early hours of the morning.'

This gruelling day and night schedule of the women has destroyed their family life completely. After working for seventeen to eighteen hours a day, what interest can a woman have in sex with her husband after she returns? Women with nursing children find it all the more difficult to cope. Since their husbands too have to work outside, infants and toddlers are left in the care of slightly older children. These eight- and nine-year old children carry the

infants to Nipani in the afternoon. There they sit outside the godowns, waiting for the shutters to open for the afternoon break. When the shutters open, they give their siblings to their mothers to be fed, and then take them back home. The mother is able to meet her nursing baby just for this half-hour for the full day.

A nursing mother once told me, 'Our infant children eat mud and dung at home. They cry bitterly till they are out of breath, but there is no one to hear them.' Only the woman's mother-in-law may be at home, but she will be very old and almost totally blind and deaf.

'When do you have holidays?' I asked one of the workers.

'What blasted holiday! We can't even rest our backs for a moment. We do not hear about the death of someone close to us for days together. We have no time to look at ourselves. We can hardly meet our husbands. Our children may be ill, or there may be some other problem, but we have no time to think about these things. We are constantly on the run as if some devil were chasing us. Look at our legs, they are about to break because of running so much.'



The number of women working in the *bidi* and *jarda* factories is very large. Checkers in the *bidi* factories are all too happy if women come for the daily *hajeri*, because they are easier to cheat. Men do not take such things lying down and are likely to complain. If a male comes for the *hajeri*, they deliberately identify more 'chhat' *bidis* in his quota. He too will learn his lesson and start sending his wife to the factory for the *hajeri* instead. This practice gives rise to many problems.

The checkers have an eye for young women and they take the opportunity to squeeze their hands while taking the *bidis* from them. They will fling the bundles of rejected *bidis* at their bosoms instead of handing them over. Once a checker even touched the breast of a woman in all the rush. Women suffer such indignities quietly, fearing that the checker might otherwise pick out extra *chhat bidis* from their quota.

The checkers become extremely brazen, as there is hardly any opposition to them. They show undue intimacy with the women while talking to them, using 'tu' instead of 'tumhi' when addressing them. To settle scores with the more spirited women who might occasionally come their way, they pick out more *chhat bidis* from their quota. If the woman breaks into tears at the thought of what those at home will say, these checkers will retort, 'When you roam the whole town, you never cry. Why do you cry now? Am I your man that you come and shed tears before me?'

It is a part of checker's job to arrange good-looking women for his master. The checkers have their own tricks to trap such a woman. First, they use the weapon of *chhat bidis* to harass her. Or they will supply her with less *jarda* and render her completely helpless. When she complains, they say, 'Go, meet the master.' The master is in his office. The woman is caught in a dilemma. If she goes, there is no telling what might come to pass there. If she refuses to go, she might lose her job. Some women then opt to go to the master. In return, a woman who relents will get extra *jarda* and no *chhat bidis* will be found. Even if her husband or other family members come to know about her liaison, they choose to keep quiet for fear of losing the extra work that the family is getting from the factory. It is the turn of the checkers when the masters have finished with these women. One old woman told me, 'Nipani is meant only for youthful women. A good-looking woman can get everything here, but if an old hag happens to be dying in agony, no one will bother.'

Women who pound *jarda* are even more vulnerable than the women who roll *bidis* at home, because the latter have to make just one trip to the factory and their contact with it is limited to just this one daily encounter. A *jarda* worker, on the other hand, remains in the custody of her master from eight in the morning till after midnight. Actually, according to the law, no woman in India can be made to work during the night shift in any factory. But this provision is flouted openly in the *bidi* factories. In fact, such malpractices have reached a peak in Nipani.

In *jarda* godowns, it is the *munims* who act as agents for their masters. In this matter, they are the counterparts of the checkers in the *bidi* factories. The master appoints elderly women whom he has slept with in the past as *mukadams* (supervisors). When a master takes a fancy to a woman, he conveys his desire to the *munim* who instructs the *mukadam* to give that woman lighter jobs like straining tobacco and filling water. One day, the *munim* asks the woman to go upstairs and sweep the office of his master. There the master offers her tea or sherbet. Sometimes he even offers her liquor. This is a pleasurable experience for a woman who has till then lived in abject poverty, so she usually consents. But if she doesn't, then the master might add some intoxicant in her sherbet and would not hesitate to rape her. If the woman resists sweeping the office upstairs, she is told by the *munim*, 'Look, this would mean your work here will increase. You will have to carry fifty kilo sacks in the godown. Besides, if you complain, what will your mother-in-law say? Your husband will drive you out of his house. Our master will himself complain to your husband and say that you are a woman of loose virtue. Then tell me, who would your husband believe, you or your master? How can a big *shet* tell lies, he might say to himself.'

And the *munim* turns out to be right. There are cases where husbands have deserted wives accused by factory owners.

The fact that they can lay their hand on any woman they desire encourages the owners and gives rise to different types of deviant sexual practices. There are examples: an aged factory owner and his young son both had a physical relationship with the same woman. One of the young owners had a predilection for older women. One day, he got drunk and called a crone upstairs to his office. He caught hold of her and started pushing her on to the floor. Aghast, the old woman exclaimed, 'Child, you are like my son, what is this you are doing to me?' She made a big noise, so the *munim* and other workers of godowns ran to the office and the old woman was rescued.

One of the merchants died recently, aged eighty. This man of advanced age was incapable of intercourse but that did not deter him from calling women upstairs and fondling their breasts.

The sexual vigour of these traders, who enjoy unlimited and unquestioned access to women, gets jaded because of over-indulgence. But their lustful habits die hard, so it is their daily concern to look for – and practise – a variety of arousal techniques.

With great shame, a young worker narrated the predilections of her fifty-five year old master in this matter. According to her, 'I have no words to describe his deviant tastes. He could not get an erection, so he used to tell us to suck his penis. We told him, you can do anything with us, but don't ask us to do something like this. But he never listened.'

'But what do they do to avoid pregnancy, do they use some contraceptives?' I asked one of the men from Nipani. 'What contraceptives are you talking about? These women don't even have enough food to eat,' said the man.

'But then how do they avoid pregnancy'?

'They don't. There is always a legal father to any child that may be born. Who can figure out which child belongs to which father?'

'Because of all this illicit sexual activity, there is an epidemic of sexually transmitted diseases here. Most of the tobacco factory owners themselves suffer from these diseases, which are then transmitted by the women workers to their husbands. If a survey is done to determine the incidence of such diseases in Nipani, its findings will shock many,' said a doctor in Nipani.



The unrestrained power of the *bidi* factory owners is the root cause of the blatant economic and sexual exploitation that abounds in Nipani. The city is virtually under the thumbs of tobacco traders and industrialists. At this point of time, the workers do not seem to have the strength to challenge this regime.

There has been a long tradition of trade unionism in the profession of *bidi* rolling which in fact dates back to 1946 when *bidi* workers used to work in sheds built by tobacco factories in Nipani. The workers used to come to these sheds every day and roll *bidis* there. This ensured humane working hours and proper holidays

for the workers. The working conditions of *bidi* workers were much better in many respects. The workers used to get two rupees a day in those days. Since they worked together in one place, they had their own association that even organized a sit-in strike for increased wages.

But the strike recoiled on the workers when the owners decided to dismantle those sheds to escape their responsibilities under the provisions of the Factories Act, and introduced the present system of the workers rolling *bidis* in their homes. This absolved the factory owners from any norms regarding working hours, minimum wages, weekly holidays, bonus etc. The *bidi* workers in Nipani organized a strike in 1952 for two months against the unfair system of getting the *bidis* rolled at home. But the strike was unsuccessful.

Earlier, there were many *bidi* factories in Maharashtra in places like Kolhapur, Jaisingpur and Miraj. The legislation governing *bidi* workers was quite 'progressive' in this State. Because of this, many factories moved out of Maharashtra and shifted to nearby Nipani in Karnataka State. Thus the population of *bidi* workers in Nipani increased sharply, and when they started getting organized under the banner of a trade union, the *bidi* industrialists started opening new branches in the nearby villages. These rural areas suffer from chronic unemployment and poverty, and the villagers are always strapped for cash. Hence, they are ever willing to work for wages lower than those prevailing in Nipani (Rs.3.20 for a thousand *bidis*). Closing down the factories in Nipani is problematic because of the possibility of interference from the government and the workers, so the factory owners have simply increased the work in the village branches and reduced it in Nipani.

In the intervening period, many committees were appointed to improve the working conditions of *bidi* workers, but the tobacco lobby opposed each one of them. Finally, however, the Bidi Workers' Law came into existence in 1970–71. But the tobacco owners managed to get a stay on the operation of the law for two years. Today this law is in force, but the owners flout it in spirit by taking recourse to its numerous loopholes.

Even if they roll *bidis* at home, the law stipulates that workers will be treated as permanent employees and entitled to bonus and other benefits if they work for three continuous months for a single owner. But the owners flout this provision by maintaining employment registers in which the names of the employees keep changing every three months. First the worker's name appears, then his wife's and then his child's and so on.

Because of these tricks and especially because of the many rural branches, there is a great surplus of workers in the profession. The actual work has not increased; instead, it has been divided among several more workers. As a result, nobody gets enough wages and nobody can afford to leave. If workers in Nipani demand that the rural branches be shut down, it would mean a betrayal of the rural *bidi* workers. The tobacco lobby exploits this dilemma of the workers.

At the moment, the state of the trade union is very bad. Its office is located in a dilapidated roofless hut in the workers' colony and its official correspondence and records – all of four or five files – are kept in a broken tin trunk lying amidst a heap of trash in the same hut.

The factory owners see to it that workers do not join the trade union. The worker gets less work from his master if he is even seen in the company of some unionist. Such a worker gets tobacco sufficient for only five hundred *bidis* instead of one thousand. This affects his next day's meal and compels the worker to crawl to his master begging for regular work.

'In Nipani, no tobacco owner abuses us or sends goons to beat us up. They just reduce our work and we are sure to fall in line,' said an old worker.

Under these adverse conditions, Subhash Joshi, a geography lecturer in Nipani's college, runs the trade union of these tobacco workers. All the members of the Managing Committee of the Devchand Shah College, where Subhash Joshi teaches, belong to the lobby of tobacco traders and industrialists. They sacked Joshi from his job, accusing him of indulging in union activities. But because he was very popular, the students started a fierce agitation

against his dismissal and compelled the college authorities to reinstate him. Then the factory owners sacked the workers who worked with Subhash Joshi. Today the tobacco owners have lodged false complaints of assault and rioting against these workers and Joshi, trapping them in litigation battles. The workers are trying to resist this injustice by means of peaceful agitations and hunger strikes.

The *bidi* worker legislation could come into force because there are *bidi* workers all over the country, but since the centres where *jarda* is crushed are few in number, the welfare of these workers was not even considered. The tobacco industrialists openly flout the provision banning women from working in night shifts. The practice of making a worker work in two continuous shifts is also illegal. Yet, in tobacco godowns, the same woman is made to work from eight in the morning to four in the evening, and again, from then onwards till 2 a.m. Sometimes, the owners want to sprinkle water on the tobacco and mix it, for which it is not profitable to wait. So the women are even forced to work till five in the morning. Such women report for work at four in the evening the following day.

The wages stipulated by the government for tobacco workers are already very low, considering the hard labour involved in this occupation. Moreover, it is customary to make deductions on various pretexts from these wages. I enquired about this from Anna Kurbetti, a big tobacco industrialist in Nipani. 'This is the custom here,' was all he said.

'But don't you think that this practice is wrong and needs to be changed?'

'When I say it is a custom, it means that it is a custom. So where is the question of changing it? And who is going to change it? You first tell other businessmen to change it, then I will follow suit.'

Many women workers have complaints against Anna Kurbetti for this practice. They are especially unhappy with Nizam, his checker. Anna Kurbetti possesses six large bungalows in a long row behind the petrol pump in Nipani.

It is easy for these tobacco industrialists to flout the laws because the State of Karnataka is steeped in corruption, and the industrialists have enough money to buy the entire Labour Department of the State. The number of workers living in Nipani is huge, and yet, there is no labour office in the city. Instead, the office is located in distant Chikkodi, a *taluka* town. Because of this anomaly, the worker in Nipani does not get any assistance when he requires it most. The Labour Department does not take any notice of repeated applications or complaints made by the worker. Once in a while, some official from this department comes here. Of course, he meets only the owner, notes down whatever he says, and the matter is treated as closed.

Already, the tobacco worker is extremely powerless and does not have the strength to fight legal battles. Then again, numerous hurdles are placed in the path of any organized union activity. Besides, there is hardly any hope from the government. In such a hopeless situation the ordinary worker thinks that since there is no point in asking for anything better, the best option is to accept whatever is given, however meagre it may be. So he remains quiet.



Tobacco merchants can corner a worker from all sides because of their money power. In the Nipani region, unlimited economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few commission agents, tobacco traders, and *jarda* and *bidi* industrialists. The most powerful among these are those who have all three of these businesses. They not only exploit and oppress the *bidi* workers, but also abuse and cheat the tobacco farmers.

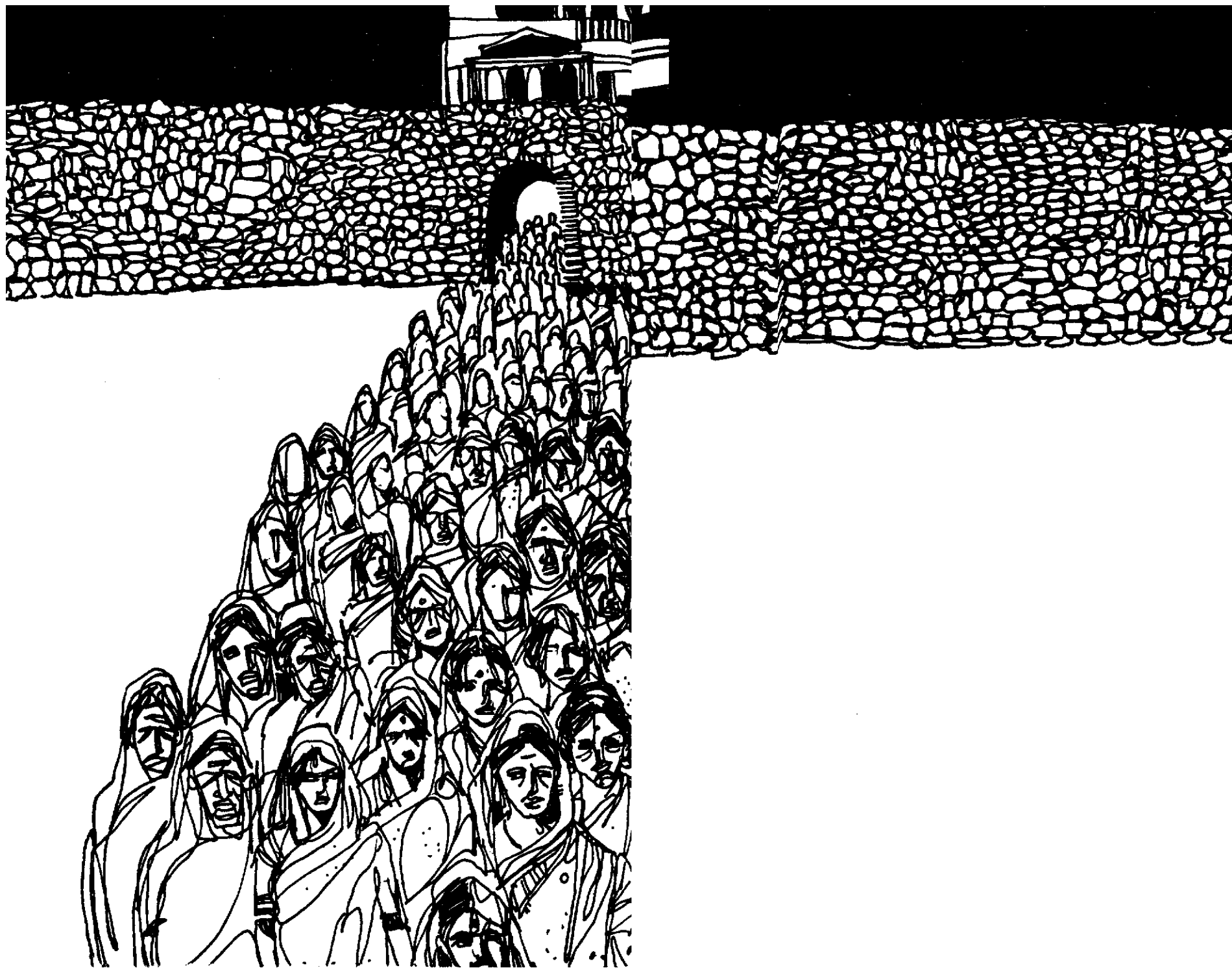
The merchants buy tobacco from farmers, make *jarda* from it and sell it to the *bidi* industries in different cities. Though they are ordinary commission agents, the entire trade runs according to their whims. They have trapped all the tobacco farmers in the Nipani region into bondage. The *Sarpanch* or *Patil* of every village works as the agent of these tobacco traders, for which the merchants give him a small share of the profits. Thus they ensure through the *Sarpanch* that no local farmer sells tobacco to any other trader.

Devchand Shah is known as the 'tobacco king' among all the tobacco merchants of this region. He purchases tobacco in such huge quantities that, finally, whatever rate he sets is followed by all the other traders. The rates of tobacco have been continuously dwindling for the last few years. Every year some explanation or the other is offered as justification for the falling rates. The excuses include drought, the Bangladesh war, Emergency, etc. The rate dropped from Rs.25 per kilo to Rs.17 a kilo. Last year the rate nosedived to Rs.4 per kilo (at some places tobacco even sold for 60 paise per kilo). As a result, the farmers not only did not make a profit or break even, but could not even cover the cost of insecticides sprayed on their crops.

Tobacco is a very difficult crop to cultivate. The overheads like wages, insecticides and maintenance eat up a lot of resources. But all this investment merely follows the whims of the merchants. Since farmers give their commitment to the merchants in advance, they cannot take their produce to the open market at Kolhapur for a more remunerative price, and in Nipani they do not get a good price.

Just as there are no rules governing the fixing of procurement rates, there is total chaos in the other dealings of the tobacco traders as well. The tobacco trade, with a huge turnover of hundreds of crores of rupees, follows no standardised weights and measures. Whether 17 kilos or 27 kilos make one *mana* (a traditional measure of weight) is not fixed – that is decided by the traders. Because of this confusion, outsiders are not able to follow their dealings. No universal rules can be applied. Surprisingly, the Chikkodi Taluka Marketing Committee, the main governmental agency for procuring agricultural produce here, does not deal in tobacco, the main crop of the region.

Claiming 'discounts' under different heads is another ploy by which the merchants loot tobacco farmers. Concessions for gunny bags, transportation, sticks found in tobacco leaves, and the dust that gets mixed with it are all discounted by the merchants while paying the procurement price to the tobacco farmers. Some tobacco is spilled while packing in gunny bags, so the merchants



claim 5 kilos concession on every quintal of tobacco. The veins in tobacco leaves are like sticks and therefore useless, so the merchants deduct the price of two kilos per quintal while making payment. Two more kilos of concession is extorted as the tobacco comes with some soil from the fields. While transporting the produce, some spills in the bullock cart and therefore the merchants claim a deduction of one kilo per quintal on this account.

In this manner, a farmer is denied his dues for about ten to fifteen kilos on every quintal. This amount is deducted from the total weight of his produce and only then is he paid (or rather, the merchants say they will pay). Over and above this, there is a ten percent commission on the entire dealing. (There is another queer practice in the *bidi* trade of Nipani and Andhra Pradesh according to which a *bidi* worker, after rolling one thousand *bidis*, rolls 25 extra *bidis* for his master as a gesture of *khushali*!)

One tobacco trader in Nipani is quite famous for his 'charity'. He gives donations to different temples and religious places, and earns merit. However, these pious ends are achieved by direct deductions from the money due to the tobacco farmers. This is called 'deduction for charitable ends.'

The merchants do not pay the farmer his dues readily, even after reducing the price and claiming discounts. They pay him bit by bit over a period of one year, during which time the farmer goes to the merchant frequently for his money and remains in awe of him. By delaying the payment to the farmer, the merchant uses that money for his business without any interest.

This tobacco trader manages to raise huge loans through banks by hypothecating tobacco, and corners a lot of money by denying the farmers any interest. The bank determines the quality of such hypothecation by asking the 'tasters' to check the produce. They test the quality by smoking a *bidi* made from that tobacco. The taster may then decide that the tobacco is worth Rs.40 per kilo, and the trader gets a loan according to the value of the produce. Who are these tasters? None other than the traders themselves. They certify tobacco worth Rs.10 (per kilo) as worth Rs.40. The merchants get loans worth crores of rupees on the basis of such

certification and use that as capital for their moneylending activities. Twenty banks have branches in Nipani and the members of the boards of directors of private and co-operative banks are all tobacco traders. This makes their job quite easy.

The illicit business of mixing sub-standard tobacco from Gujarat with high quality Nipani tobacco takes place on a large scale here. To be able to do this, inter-state 'relations' must be good. These are cultivated and maintained by the tobacco traders by bribing government officials. Tobacco is subject to excise duty and precise rules are laid down in this matter, but the traders manage to bypass them by greasing a few palms.

Excise officers have amassed huge amounts of money in Nipani, and some of them have built plush bungalows at Kolhapur and Satara. Costly carpets and large chandeliers adorn the houses, giving them a palatial appearance.

The *jarda* industrialists not only exploit traders and tobacco farmers but also sell their *jarda* at excessive prices to *bidi* manufacturers spread all over the country. The manufacturers of *bidis* require blends of different grades of tobacco coming from different farms. The *jarda* traders know these blends well, and hence all *bidi* manufacturers depend on them. Secondly, the *jarda* magnates provide lakhs of rupees worth of tobacco on credit to the *bidi* manufacturers. This is not a problem, because the merchant does not pay his farmers until he gets his money from the *bidi* manufacturer. But when he supplies *jarda* on credit to the *bidi* manufacturers, he charges interest from them.

The price of *bidis* increases because the *bidi* manufacturers buy tobacco at exorbitant rates. But since smoking is an addiction of the ordinary man, the demand decreases if the prices increase beyond a point. So the only way in which the *bidi* manufacturer can increase his profit is to pay less wages to *bidi* workers.

The big tobacco merchants not only cheat the farmers, but also harass the *bidi* manufacturers and even gobble up the small-time tobacco traders in their lust for profit. On the strength of his massive capital, a large merchant can announce a low procurement price for tobacco and can afford to give huge credit to the

bidi manufacturers. Only big merchants can control the market in this way. They corner the small traders by using their influence with credit institutions and ensuring that the small tobacco traders are not given business loans.

The small traders established their own co-operative society to break this monopoly, but the big tobacco sharks invaded it and defeated the very purpose of its existence.

Devchand Shah used to be a king among the tobacco traders until recently, but now a new power group of tobacco traders is emerging in Nipani. Ragunathrao Kadam, the local MLA and the owner of the 'Pistol' brand of *bidis*, Govindrao Manavi, the ex-MLA., and Anna Kurbetti are the nucleus of this group. Although these traders have internal rivalries, they stand united when it comes to exploiting the tobacco farmers and *bidi* workers for extra profit. These traders have a firm grip over all the affairs of this region.

The education sector in Nipani is also controlled by this class. The industrialists Manavi and Kadam own the Vidyamandir High School. These people also run the Bagewadi College in Bagewadi.

The college in the city is actually named after Devchand Shah. He and Manikchand Shah are members of the college managing committee, along with other rich and influential citizens of Nipani. Appointments of lecturers in the local college are made as per their whims and fancies. A principal of the college was sacked because he would not go the bungalows of managing committee members to play cards. The traders interfere in the affairs of the college, and even have a say in the choice of speakers invited to address the college.

The Municipal Council of Nipani was brought under an Administrator in 1963. Nipani has large numbers of tobacco and *bidi* workers, and their representatives could be elected, giving rise to an alternative leadership. Because of this fear, the tobacco lobby derails the election proceedings. They approach the courts with complaints every time elections are announced and obtain a stay. The rule of the Administrator suits the tobacco lobby fine, as it is easier to manipulate a single individual than a host of elected rep-

resentatives. In Nipani, tobacco from other states is imported and exported. Massive amounts of excise duty is thus evaded.

The tobacco owners have total hegemony over the political sector. Ragunathrao Kadam, who is the MLA of Nipani, also owns, in addition to his *bidi* factory, about four to five hundred acres of land. The financial institutions are also in his clutches as the State of Karnataka allows an MLA to nominate his representatives to these bodies. The registrars of these societies do not sanction loans to anybody unless he has the backing of the politician.

The tobacco lobby controls the local economy as well as the village *Sarpanchas*. This enables them to change the political equation at election time by merely passing on the word a day before. These traders pretend to support the demand for merger of Nipani with Maharashtra, but they ensure that the question of merger keeps simmering. The State of Karnataka was never insistent that Nipani be merged with it. It was willing to hand over this town to Maharashtra, but the tobacco traders do not want this to happen, because the tobacco trade would then come under the progressive laws of that state. Karnataka is not interested in Nipani because it is a Marathi-speaking region, and the writ of Maharashtra does not run here. As a result, Nipani has become an 'island' where the traders do as they wish.

Recently Devchand Shah mooted the idea of 'Vishal Gomantak' and suggested that Nipani be made a part of Goa. If this were ever to happen, a whole state will come in the grip of the traders. With a maritime boundary, the tobacco merchants' interstate business could go international.

The tobacco capitalists of Nipani have used their tremendous political power to stall any development projects in the Nipani region. The proposal for construction of an irrigation tank fell through. The proposed sugar factory met a similar fate and was later shifted to Sankeshwar. No developmental work, like the building of small dams and bunds, ever began in the surrounding villages. The rural work force did not have any other alternative but to work for *jarda* or *bidi* factories. If any other alternative, offering even minimum wages, were available, the factory owners would have found it difficult to get workers.

Earlier, many farmers in Maharashtra cultivated tobacco, but the uncertainty of tobacco rates and harassment by excise officers made them turn towards more profitable cash crops like groundnut, sugarcane and banana. But in the Nipani region, the farmers are under the thumb of the tobacco industrialists and are forced to cultivate this crop even though it is not profitable. Recently I.N. Beg, a young activist, has organized the tobacco farmers and launched an agitation. As a result, the unjust 'discounts' have stopped in the Akola region. But the effect of the agitation has remained limited to this small area.

The tobacco merchants and *bidi* factory owners exploit tobacco farmers, who in turn exploit those below them. The Tenancy Act of Maharashtra has transferred the ownership of the land to the actual cultivators. This has not happened in Karnataka. Here, as the legislation was about to come into force, the landlords took letters from the tenants relinquishing their rights. The tenants now work for the landlords as sharecroppers under an arrangement by which the landlord keeps three-quarters of the total produce and the tenant gets one quarter. Landlords do not give even this share regularly to their tenants, and many of them do not pay up at all. If they complain, they are evicted, and slandered so badly that no other farmer would employ them in future. The wives of such dispossessed farm labourers then go to pound *jarda* in tobacco godowns, and work from eight in the morning till two at night.

The life of these exploitative merchants is a spectacle in itself. They spend huge amounts of money daily on luxuries. In each *bidi* factory, about seven to eight lakh *bidis* are made every day. The government has stipulated a rate of Rs 5.20 for rolling one thousand *bidis*. But the *bidi* owners pay 50 paise less than this rate, and make an extra profit of Rs 400 every day. Besides, they pick out fifty thousand *chhat bidis* and make another Rs 250. This way they make an additional income of Rs 650 every day. The actual income from the business is over and above this.

This is why the *bidi* tycoons can move about in imported cars, go to Kolhapur frequently and arrange performances by professional

dancers. They also hire taxis to visit Belgaum and then take a direct flight to Mumbai or Bangalore and enjoy themselves there. The Nipani tobacco merchants also make special arrangements – called the *bichhayat* – when *bidi* factory owners from other cities of India come to Nipani. The tobacco tycoons own mansions and dance-halls in Nipani, where courtesans' dance performances are organised. Or movie stars from Mumbai may be invited by paying them large amounts of money, and they too participate in the festivities. All these are well-known facts in Nipani.

Of course, the tycoons also have unlimited access to women workers in their establishments.

I discussed the issue of this horrible exploitation with one Vasant Rao Kavale, a big tobacco merchant who has a reputation of being something of an intellectual among the tobacco traders. He defended the tobacco traders and *bidi* manufacturers with great zeal. But when I asked him how the exploitation of *bidi* and tobacco workers can be stopped and their problems addressed, he shot back, 'Do you really want to solve these problems? Then forget about writing such articles. There is only one way to solve those problems. Revolution. All these capitalists should be strangled. You can't solve the problems of the workers on one hand and not harm the capitalists on the other. No, this will not work. Let us have a big bang – a revolution!'

I had never imagined that I would get to hear talk of revolution sitting in a tobacco godown, in the office of a tobacco merchant.

The tobacco merchants do not have an iota of shame or regret about the sexual and economic exploitation of these tobacco and *bidi* workers. I discussed this issue with some other merchants and they all denied these allegations, 'We don't have such problems here ... this happens in other establishments.' While talking about the prevalent sexual harassment of female workers, the tobacco merchants expressed themselves rather cautiously, 'What you are saying is true, but no one forces these women. In fact it is these women who are of loose virtue and entice our sons.'

When I discussed this issue with the ex-MLA, the President of the Congress Block Committee and the famous *jarda* and *bidi* tycoon Govindarao Manavi, he became quite agitated and told me, 'This is bound to happen wherever men and women are working together. What about your Mumbai and Pune? You think such things don't happen there? Why blame Nipani alone when even Tagore's Shanti Niketan is known for such things.'

I had gone to a poorly lit house to meet an old woman, *chamar* by caste, who worked in a *jarda* godown. Her hair had become completely gray, disheveled and dry due to her advanced age. She had pounded tobacco in a *jarda* godown for many years. And yet she had been sacked from her work without being given even one rupee as compensation. She sat before me in the feeble light emitted by a makeshift kerosene lamp, shook her silvery gray head with despair, and told me, 'This is not Nipani, but a town of iniquity, a dark town.'



This dark town is so close to us and yet most of us know nothing about it. Forget about Nipani – we do not have the faintest knowledge of the dark pockets that exist right in the middle of the cities we inhabit. Each one thinks that their own lives are the most important thing, so important that one does not regret that one tramples without remorse on the lives of others. We grab whatever we can, wherever we can, from others, and brighten our lives with what we gain. Our opulence, as we take smooth, noiseless drives in imported cars, is the direct result of the impoverishment of thousands of poor people. This exploitation is naked and violent in Nipani, which is why I have described it in such detail here. But similar exploitation, in greater or lesser degree, goes on everywhere.

The industrialist and trading class of Nipani is an arrogant octopus with many limbs. It has enfolded the lives of thousands of workers in its crushing grip. It lords over the economic, political, cultural and educational life of Nipani. Its limbs have many eyes which immediately note any attempt by the workers to break its embrace. The worker is sacked when he is found to be indulging in trade unionism. The sacked worker cannot get any alternative em-

ployment because arrangements are made by the tobacco lobby not to let such alternatives come up. The workers may try to come out of this grip by providing good education for their children, but even the schools are such that no teaching takes place in them.

Here the *jarda* magnates and tobacco traders charge *bidi* manufacturer exorbitantly for the *jarda*. The *bidi* manufacturers in turn pay poor wages to their workers. This is a process of exploitation. Besides, the traders exploit the farmers and the farmers exploit the tenants working for a meager quarter-share. Since it does not provide an adequate livelihood to the tenant, he has to send his wife for the time-consuming, backbreaking job of pounding *jarda* in the tobacco godowns of the same trader. The *bidi* worker sends his wife to the *bidi* factory to avoid more *chhat bidis* being rejected from his lot. The master class of the *jarda* trade commits atrocities upon women workers. In both these cycles it is the woman worker who gets terribly exploited. A male worker is also exploited, but this is restricted to the economic domain alone, whereas a woman is exploited both economically and sexually. Her very femininity becomes the target of exploitation. And in this matter the exploiters do not show any shame or qualms. Those tobacco merchants who brazenly justify this sexual exploitation saying, 'This is nothing, it goes on even in Shanti Niketan!' are an even worse blot on humankind.

Of course, what those traders say cannot be denied. Such things do happen in cities like Mumbai and Pune. It may not be as blatant as in Nipani, but women working at lower levels in office establishments have to pay the price for being women. Helpless women labourers in the villages toil in plantations, gardens and farms, where their helplessness and poverty are exploited to the hilt by landlords and farmers. These atrocities are no less shameful than the atrocities perpetrated on *dalits*.

While looking at the world of tobacco and *bidi* workers, one is constantly reminded of the happy lot of industrial workers in Mumbai and Pune. These workers earn a monthly salary of three to four thousand rupees and can openly choose a trade union that promises them a better deal. Today, most of the industrial workers

are auctioning themselves to whichever union can get them better wages. They are not even willing to listen to the view that the aim of working-class solidarity should be to establish a new value system in society. Revolution might be a far-fetched idea, but how about giving a helping hand to those who need it first? This is a simple principle of humanity. Why do our organized trade unions not rally around these insecure tobacco and *bidi* workers and strengthen them?

The well-fed employees in the organized sector have their trade unions. This lot, dressed in terrywool clothes, ties and fancy trousers, gathers in front of the skyscrapers at Nariman Point in Mumbai on their weekly off-days. Whipping silk flags out of their pockets, they wave them around, shout a few slogans and then smoke packets of cigarettes to get over their exhaustion. Employees in the Life Insurance Corporation, airline pilots and other organised workers conduct themselves similarly. We do not oppose their right to organise themselves, but this organized class should realize that due to its high incomes, it has been bracketed with the richer segment of the society. It is high time that this class stops asking only for pay hikes and uses its might to protect basic human rights.

People who are able to earn their bread and butter and have their bellies full have no justification for asking more from society. This satiated population should do something for the impoverished masses that survive on the waste found in the bins of the rich; this is a civilised response. If the better-off in society fail to do this, it is difficult to imagine the level to which humankind will sink in future.

The trading and industrialist class, which controls the reins of society, will not on its own let the working class achieve a free, secure life. This segment shamelessly preaches revolution to the working class, while sitting on wealth worth crores of rupees. The capitalists know that the workers cannot get organised, that they are not in a condition as yet in which this can happen.

Under these circumstances, those who want to live by a just social order must intervene in favour of the poor. Only then can we hope to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

Glossary

- aarti* – ceremonial worship of the gods, accompanied by chanting or singing
- aathwa* – a small container for measuring grain
- anna* – one-sixteenth of a rupee
- babul* – a weed-like tree
- bazaar* – market
- bhanamati* – ritual black magic
- bhajan* – traditional devotional song
- bhajan mandali* – an group of people organised for singing bhajans
- bhaji-pav* – bread with spicy accompaniment or savouries
- bhakri* – coarse grain bread, usually made from sorghum or pearl millet flour
- bhang* – an intoxicating extract of the cannabis plant
- bhaubeej* – a ceremony during Deepavali, when the sister performs *aarti* for the brother and the brother gives her gifts; the gifts are often also referred to as *bhaubeej*
- bibba* – a type of oil nut
- bidi* – tobacco flakes rolled up in tembhu leaves, a popular low cost cigarette in India
- boharin* – woman trading in clothes and old utensils
- burfi* – a type of sweetmeat
- chamar* – cobbler
- chapatti* – unleavened wheat bread
- chappals* – slippers (footwear)
- charoli* – small brown seeds, used in sweetmeats

charpai – a stringed cot
chhat – rejected
chulha – fireplace
Congress grass – parthenium grass
Dalit – India's Scheduled Castes
damroo – a kind of drum
dargah – Muslim tomb, often used for worship
davari – a small drum
Devarshi, devrishi – shaman, witch-doctor
dharna – a sit-in demonstration
dhol – a type of drum
Dhol-Zanga – traditional drum and cymbals
dhoti – a piece of white cloth, wrapped round the waist and covering the lower part of the body, worn by men
dombari – a street acrobat
Dussehra – a festival
fakir – Muslim holy man, mendicant
ghagra – a kind of skirt
ghat – an earthen pot used by the Davaris
godambi – a type of sweetmeat
gogol – a kind of grass
gondhal – a ceremonial session of revelry
haladi – turmeric powder
jalebi – a type of sweetmeat
jarda – tobacco flakes
jati panchayat – caste panchayat
kamandalu – vessel used by sadhus for carrying water
kararji – a tree
khushali – good feeling
kulfi – a sweetmeat similar to ice cream
kumbhe – seeds of a tree
kumkum – vermilion powder
kurmure-dal – puffed rice with roasted pulses
kurta – a kind of shirt
laddu – a type of sweetmeat

lathi – a stout stick, about 4–5 feet long, often used as a weapon
Madrassa – a Muslim religious school
Mahar – an untouchable dalit caste
Maharwada – the area in the village where Mahars live, usually located at some distance from the rest of the village.
mana – about 40 kgs
Mang – an untouchable dalit caste
mantrik – a witch-doctor who specialises in spells
mosambi, narangi – popular types of country liquor
mukadam – supervisor
munim – clerk, accountant
nagveli – a type of creeper
navas – promissory offering made to God in the hope of obtaining something
nullah – stream
paan – betel-nut leaf
paan shop – a small kiosk from which cigarettes, tobacco and paan are usually sold
pallu – the section of the saree draped over the shoulder
panch – a member of the Panchayat
Panchayat – village or caste council
pandal – temporary tent erected for holding ceremonies and functions
pao/pav – bread
papads – thin, circular rolls of flour, eaten roasted or fried
payali – about 2 kgs
pedha – a type of sweetmeat
peer – a Muslim holy man
pchalwan – wrestler, body-builder
pipal – a tree, *Ficus religiosa*
puja – ceremonial worship
pungi – traditional pipe used by snake-charmers
rangoli – decoration done on the ground using coloured powder, the powder itself is also called rangoli
reefaad – discarded, irregular sides of sawn logs
roti – unleavened wheat bread

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sabudana khichri – a food preparation of sago

sadhu – holy man

sarees – traditional wear for women in India, a length of cloth between 5-9 yards in length, draped round the body

Sarpanch – head of the village council or panchayat

Satyanarayan puja – ceremonial worship of the god Satyanarayana

shalu – a coarse grain

shet – rich merchant, a form of respect to rich and powerful persons

shindi – a tree

shira – a sweetmeat, prepared from wheat flour

shramadaan – voluntary donation of labour

taal – a pair of small cymbals, tied together with a piece of string

taluka – an administrative division; about 10 talukas usually comprise a district

Taluka panchayat – taluka council

tamasha – Maharashtrian folk theatre

tamotha – a type of plant

tanda – colony of huts

tantani – a kind of wild hedge plant

tembhu – leaves of a tree, used for rolling bidis

tila – red mark applied on forehead

Vaidya – doctor

varna – four-stage caste system

yagna – traditional sacrifice

zatra – fair

Zilla Parishad – district council

